SPORTS & STYLE

Sports Illustrated

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CLAY PATRICK
McBRIDE

Brrr

Why **JOE BURROW** (AND SEEMINGLY EVERY OTHER ATHLETE) Is So Immersed in Fashion

by **Nick Remsen**

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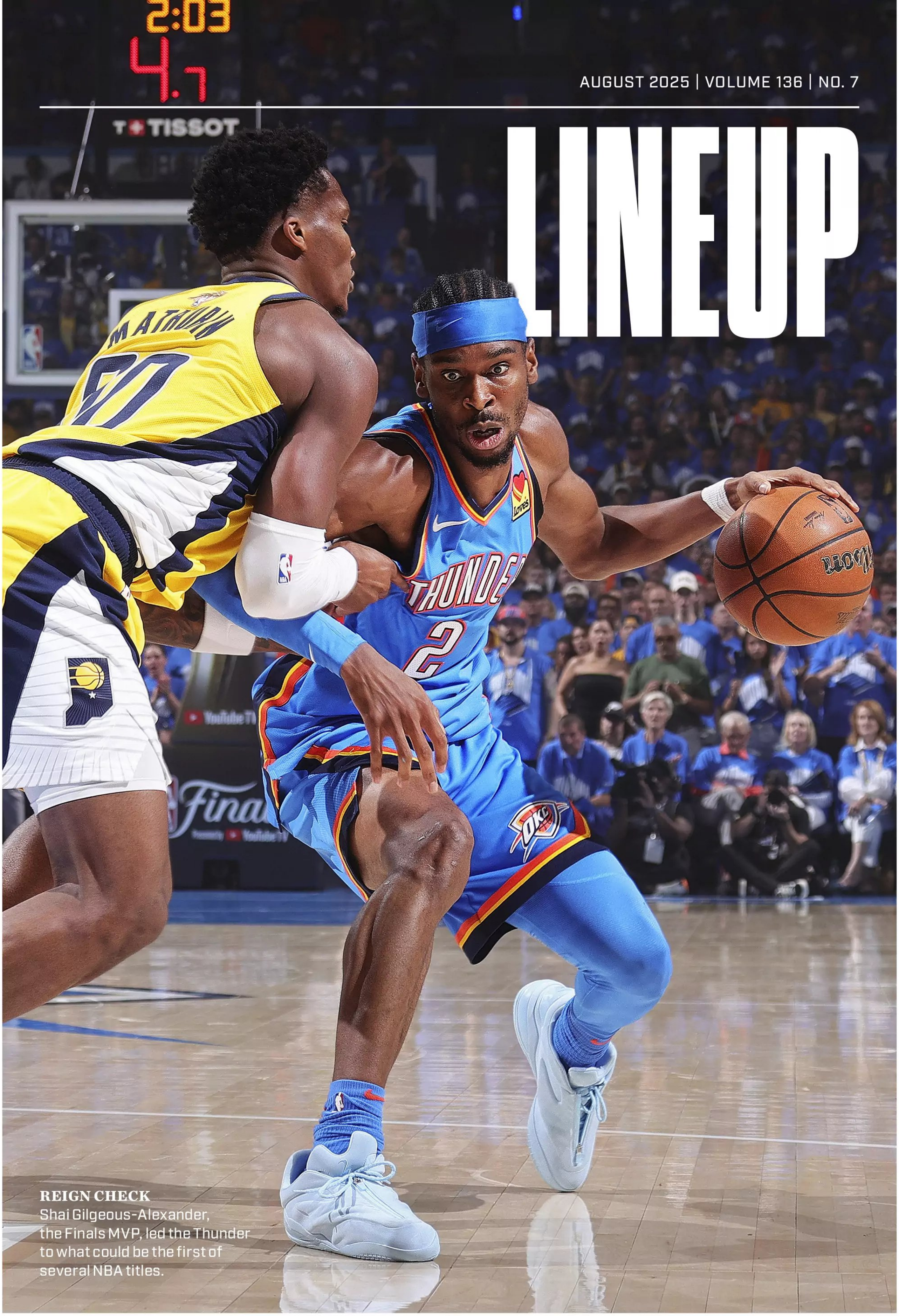

REIGN CHECK
Shai Gilgeous-Alexander, the Finals MVP, led the Thunder to what could be the first of several NBA titles.

NATHANIEL S. BUTLER/NBAE/GETTY IMAGES

Life Book memoirs
Life Book more than words
more than words...
Through My Ey
BRENT MILLER

Shirley and I were married at Chelsea Registry office on 18 M
1961.

I was from a Roman Catholic family, and although I know my mother would have preferred us to marry in a Catholic Church, Shirley was Church of England by faith. That complicated matters as far as the Church was concerned. We had visited the Jesuits at Mount Street to discuss the possibility of a Roman Catholic marriage, but my overriding priority was my love for Shirley. I wanted to marry her and would not allow the Church to dictate to me where or how that should happen. I knew that I loved Shirley and I wanted to be her husband. Nothing else mattered. We were going to spend the rest of our lives together.

Our wedding reception was a small gathering of family and close friends, and was held at the home of my best man, the Daily Mail photographer Phil Jackson. My mother was at the wedding and was happy for us. Shirley's father had died some years earlier but her mother was at the wedding with her partner, Bob.

My Dad had died earlier the same year. It was a shame that he was not at the wedding. He would have been happy to know how lucky I had been in love.

At the time of my dad's death, Shirley and I were jointly involved in a business venture with some friends, Len and Joanne Keeble. They wanted to open a ladies' boutique, a new concept which was becoming popular in America. The boutique was called The Lilac Room and was situated in Eton High Street by the river. I spent my free Saturdays decorating the shop, painting the shop front a lilac colour, and the idea was that Shirley, who was women's

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Wedding day with my angel Shirley on 18th March 1961

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LINEUP

Look Outré
Burrow is not afraid to trade his on-field stripes for bold, fun and sometimes whimsical attire.

CLAY PATRICK MCBRIDE

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ESSAY

Pad Habits Die Hard

LIKE SO MANY PARENTS, MLB MANAGERS ARE DEALING WITH THE ISSUE OF THEIR CHARGES' EXCESSIVE SCREEN TIME

▸ BY STEPHANIE APSTEIN
▸ PHOTOGRAPHS BY ERICK W. RASCO

IN LATE April, Rangers manager Bruce Bochy saw something he didn't like. It wasn't just the lackluster at-bats that had his team 26th in the majors in OPS, 29th in walks per strikeout and 30th in runs scored. It was what was happening during those at-bats, in the dugout. "There's times when guys do something good, come in and [their teammates'] heads are down," Bochy says.

Those heads are looking at the 20 iPads Major League Baseball supplies for use during games. A few go to the bullpen and the day's starting pitcher, but they are mostly claimed by the hitters, who pore over their swing mechanics, review the pitcher's offerings or fact-check an umpire's call.

"They are helpful," Bochy admits. "[But] I think we get a little caught up in the process, instead of watching the game and competing out there."

So the Rangers made what is becoming an increasingly common decision among MLB teams as they grapple with the proliferation of technology: The team took the iPads away. Echoing parents everywhere, baseball coaches are beginning to complain that the problem with Gen Z is too much screen time.

The Rangers scored 15 runs their first night as Luddites, and Bochy allowed himself a smile or two. "I loved it," he says. "I really did." But two days later—after the team scored one run, then none—they gave them back. Team officials had made their point. "You don't want to take away any resource that might make them better," Bochy says. "But it's also just a reminder, *Hey, it's O.K. to watch the game.*"

For much of baseball history, the most players could hope for was grainy broadcast film or some Zapruder footage from the stands. About a decade ago, teams opened video rooms within the ballparks, and almost immediately coaches began to lament that so many hitters fled there to review their swings that dugouts were empty during games.

MLB cut off in-game access in 2020 as part of COVID-19 protocols. The restriction, of course, came in the context of an MLB investigation that found the Astros had used the replay room to steal signs illegally. The players already had access to dugout iPads for scouting information and historical video; in '21, the league gave them video during games, on a slight delay, cut so that they could not see the catcher's signs.

Even the oldest-school coaches acknowledge some jealousy at the amount of visual feedback hitters have these days. "I wish I had 'em," says Rangers hitting coach Bret Boone, the former All-Star second baseman who was brought on board in May in part because he's the sort of guy who sometimes reminds players jovially, "Get the f--- off your iPads!" But he joins

LONE STAR LOW-TECH
The Rangers had plenty to smile about after (temporarily) giving up their iPads on April 29, when they hung a 15-spot on the A's.

RON JENKINS/GETTY IMAGES (RANGERS)

POINT OF VIEWING
Using a tablet hasn't hurt All-Star Steven Kwan (above) of the Guardians, while the Dodgers try to keep their focus on the field.

the growing old guard that sees loss as well as gain, starting with the image TV viewers see at least once per game, of a dugout full of players staring at iPads.

"You start to get dependent on it, and you're starting to miss what's most important," says Dodgers manager Dave Roberts, whose team also cut down on iPads for a stretch in 2022, at the suggestion of first baseman Freddie Freeman. They kept one, so players who had an important concern could glance at it between innings, but otherwise they required eyes on the field. "We just needed to have guys focused on the game," recalls third baseman Max Muncy.

So what are the important factors the iPad obscures?

Pitch tipping, for one. The videos are cut starting at the moment the pitcher begins his motion, meaning you can't watch him come set and, perhaps, take a big breath before he throws a fastball. (Some veteran bench players do see this change as offering job security—they can use their eyes to pick up a minuscule motion that no one else, especially someone looking at a screen, caught.)

They can also take a matchup out of context. The scouting report may say that a pitcher throws a curveball 20% of the time in a certain count. But, says veteran outfielder Kevin Pillar, "If I'm the seventh hitter, I can see he hasn't thrown a curveball for a strike to the first six hitters." He might be able to eliminate that pitch.

And the iPads can distort the rhythm of the game entirely. "You miss how quick the game really is," says Nationals manager Davey Martinez, who took the devices away for the last month of last season. "On the iPad you can make it slow, slow, slow."

Game speed can actually be helpful when a player might be prone to overanalyzing, which watching video encourages. You're unlikely to be able to make a mechanical change during a game. "If you're having swing thoughts in the box, you're probably not succeeding," says Guardians catcher Austin Hedges.

"If you want to look at the iPad, put 50 line drives at 98 miles an hour [on there]," says Martinez. "But those guys will go back and look and they swung at a ball that went 55 feet. [You don't need the iPad.] I can tell you: Stop chasing."

Several managers and coaches have also expressed concern that the instant video breeds an obsession with reviewing balls and strikes. Where a hitter might once have had to wait for the final out of an inning, go play defense, and only then head to the video room if a call was still eating at him, he can now have someone hand him an iPad before he even puts his bat down.

"You had a two-strike count on you," says Angels manager Ron Washington. "You can't take a pitch that breaks that close." But because the iPad agrees it was a ball, the player feels self-righteous instead of learning a two-strike approach. And regardless, the at-bat is over.

But most of all, coaches worry that players are so focused on the details that they lose sight of the whole enterprise. "We're a team, trying to beat another team, in the present moment, not on an iPad," says Dodgers first base coach Chris Woodward.

But the tools are helpful, and they definitely aren't going away. Most minor league teams have at least a few iPads, so players arrive in the majors fully fluent in the technology—and often reliant on it. So there is an advantage to be found in teaching players to use it well.

"Instead of talking about what you shouldn't be doing, coaches have the opportunity to explain what to look for," says Guardians field coordinator Kai Correa. Overuse of iPads is not about the iPads, he says. It's an indication that a player does not understand the value of watching the game on the field. So he tries to point out what he sees and why that is relevant. And hitters see an opportunity to reclaim some of the ground they have lost to pitchers in the development wars over the past few years. A pitcher can use data to optimize a pitch; at least the hitters can use data to get a good sense of what it's doing.

"This game that we play now is so much more information-based that we need the metrics," says Mets left fielder Brandon Nimmo. He likes to track a pitcher's vertical break and horizontal movement in real time so he can adjust where he expects the ball to end up. "This, like, 'Well, just go up there and kind of see what they have' deal is kind of a thing of the past," he says.

This is a classic baseball conundrum. The only constant of the sport is that it's changing and its participants must adapt. "Why not have the old thing and the new thing?" says Correa. "Why not have quality conversations, experiences, watching in real time, iterating, reacting and also planning and reviewing and measuring? I will never, ever be comfortable with the argument that they're mutually exclusive."

And as for that TV image of a dugout full of players with their heads down, Correa sees it differently. "The irony of that is that if they're showing that in-game," he says, "that means nothing's happening on the field." ▢

WITH IPADS, SAYS THE NATS' MARTINEZ, "YOU MISS HOW QUICK THE GAME REALLY IS."

OHTANI
17
LOS ANGELES

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OVERDUE RETURN

ALONGSIDE PETE ROSE AND SHOELESS JOE, A LONG-FORGOTTEN ACE IS REINSTATED

▸ BY MARK McCARTER

PHIL DOUGLAS was, in the harsh, unforgiving judgment of his day, a drunk. Offered a sportswriter of the 1920s, "His great shortcoming was endeavoring to lap up all the firewater in every village he visited."

Douglas was a footnote then and continues to be now. Despite his World Series heroics in 1921, when he won two games for the New York Giants and struck out Babe Ruth three times, Shufflin' Phil Douglas—the shufflin' because of his slow, slouching gait—was one of the lesser-known baseball players banished for life by the imperious commissioner, Kenesaw Mountain Landis. When current MLB commissioner Rob Manfred decreed in May that "a person no longer with us cannot represent a threat to the integrity of the game" and that "permanent ineligibility ends upon the passing of the disciplined individual," Douglas became one of the 17 to receive a reprieve, but his was lost in the sports-talk debate over the guilt, Hall of Fame potential and legacies of Pete Rose and Shoeless Joe Jackson.

On a partly cloudy spring day not long after Manfred's decree, Douglas lies at rest near the flagpole at the hub of Tracy City Cemetery in the peaceful afternoon disturbed by dueling weed eaters tending to the grounds. His gravesite is in the shade of a flowering dogwood tree and marked by a two-foot granite baseball headstone, with a comb-over of moss and lichen. Douglas was buried in 1952 in this tiny Tennessee town atop the Cumberland Plateau 50 miles northwest of Chattanooga—30 years after a distraught, distorted letter led to his lifetime suspension from baseball.

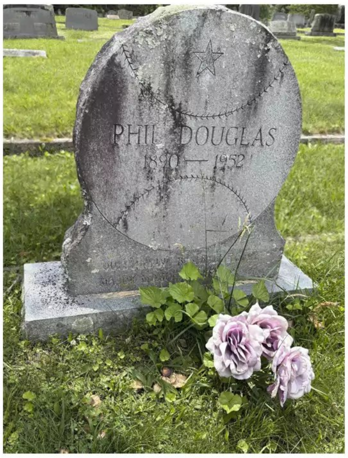
Just down the road a piece, at the Grundy County Historical Society Museum, the Douglas reinstatement is greeted with a raise-the-roof gesture, punctuated by "Whoopie!" and "It's about time." A picture of Douglas hangs on the library wall. A short bio of Douglas in a thick tome of county history describes him as "a bear of a right-handed pitcher with a wicked spitball and erratic behavior." From the historical society, you are directed catty-corner to Henry Flury and Sons, a red-roofed, old-style general store and grocery in its 120th year. P.C. Flury sits at the cashier's cubicle. His father Henry was among those who raised money for Douglas's headstone and legal expenses by selling FREE PHIL campaign buttons.

"He drank a little … a lot," Flury says of Douglas. "After he was kicked out, he worked around here at a sawmill and he was a ringer they hired to pitch in some of these amateur leagues. I never heard anything negative about him. I always heard he got shanghaied."

APTLY NICKNAMED "Little Napoleon," the 5'7" John McGraw was the archetype of the flinty manager of the day, unwilling to walk away from a brawl or controversy, and often inviting them. He won 2,763 games over 33 seasons with the Orioles and Giants, with a .586 winning percentage, 10 pennants and three World Series titles. McGraw's 1922 Giants were the defending world champions and Douglas suffered only two losses in his first 14 starts. But in a July slump, McGraw grew impatient with his team and with the lack of reliability from the 32-year-old Douglas and his penchant for climbing inside a whiskey bottle.

"The sacrifice of his fishing and drinking days between starts was a big one for Phil Douglas, and one which, for all his love of baseball, he was not always willing to make," wrote the late Tom Clark, a former Grundy County High agriculture teacher and author of *One Last Round for the Shuffler*.

Little Napoleon took some drastic measures. Having already suspended Douglas in the past, McGraw temporarily assigned a "keeper" to monitor the pitcher off the field and steer him away from liquor. On July 30, with the pennant race growing tighter, the Pirates bombarded Douglas. McGraw snarled, "Where's your bottle hid?" Douglas pleaded innocence and demanded a trade, which McGraw refused. Douglas left the park for a friend's apartment on the Upper West Side of Manhattan, where he got drunk and passed out. McGraw enlisted two detectives who hauled him to jail under false circumstances—*kidnapping* is not too strong a word for the scenario—and a Giants coach delivered Douglas to the West End Sanitarium.



SHUFFLING HOME
After a career in which he won 94 games was cut short, Douglas returned to Tennessee.

There he was subjected to a process called the Keeley Cure, which included stomach pumping, treatments with hot soaks and injections of sedatives. Douglas was released after five days, then reported to the Polo Grounds on Monday, Aug. 7. There he learned that the Giants had billed him for the taxi ride to the sanitarium and his five-day stay, plus he was fined $100 and docked his pay. A disheveled Douglas was still under the influence of the sanitarium's depressants and a two-day post-treatment whiskey binge, so McGraw scolded him viciously in front of his teammates.

In an empty clubhouse after the game, Douglas snatched a piece of Giants' stationery and wrote to a former Cubs teammate, Les Mann, then with the Cardinals. "I want to leave here but I want some inducement," Douglas wrote. "I don't

FROM LEFT: BETTMANN ARCHIVE/GETTY IMAGES; MARK MCCARTER

want this guy to win the pennant, and I feel if I stay here I will win it for him. You know how I can pitch and win. So you see the fellows, and if you want to, send a man over here with the goods and I will leave for home on next train.”

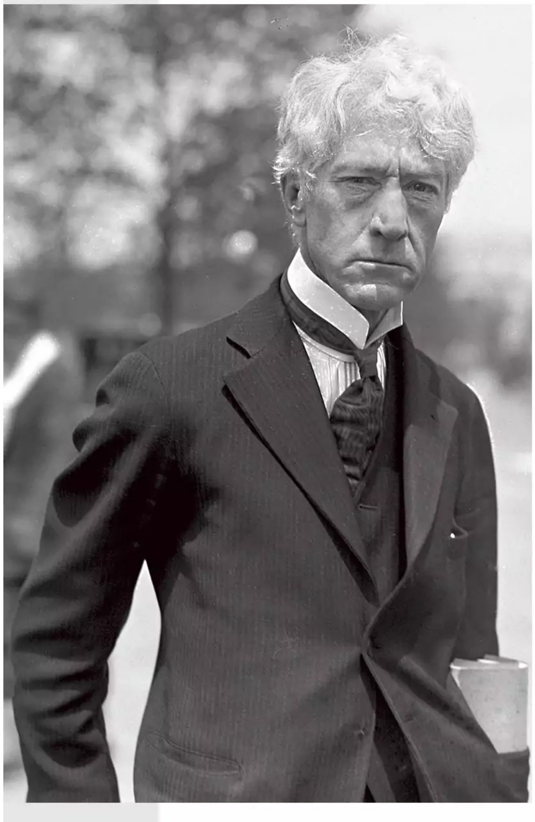
The Cardinals’ straight-arrow outfielder shared the letter with equally pious St. Louis manager Branch Rickey, who suggested Mann send it to the commissioner. Douglas wasn’t making an offer to throw games. He was, in his addled state, looking for an exit from McGraw’s abuse. The letter wasn’t Pete Rose arrogantly scribbling I’M SORRY I BET ON BASEBALL while signing an autograph or the courtroom confessions of some of the Black Sox. But Landis, installed in the wake of the 1919 scandal, was charged with restoring the sport’s integrity, and even the faintest whiff of impropriety would be met with the death penalty of a life sentence. “Now he is a disgraced ballplayer, just as crooked as the players who threw the 1919 World Series,” Landis said at a press conference. “He will never play another game in organized baseball, and not a league will knowingly admit him to its parks.”

“It seemed like an overreaction from the commissioner,” says Douglas’s great-grandson Joshua Frizzell. “He made a silly mistake in writing that letter. I don’t know what his mindset was, but it seemed he felt instant regret after doing it. From what I’ve heard, he just made a stupid, drunk decision.”

McGraw threw in some parting shots, that “his value to the club has been little or nothing.” However, Douglas was 11–4 at the time, with a league-low 2.63 ERA and the best hits-to-innings ratio in the National League. He would finish with a 94–93 career record with a 2.80 ERA and a 1.192 WHIP, now good for 146th all-time in the latter category, sandwiched between Mike Mussina and Sonny Gray and just above Warren Spahn.

“I may never get back into organized baseball,” Douglas responded, “but before long I’ll force them to admit that I was not guilty of any crookedness. I never threw a game in my life and my record during my years in baseball speaks for itself. McGraw gave me a dirty deal and the public will soon find out that I am innocent … I haven’t always kept in the best of condition, but I’ve always done my best. The letter put me in an awful fix and makes everything look bad for me, but I’m not concealing anything … I want the public to know that I am not guilty of any crooked baseball.”

LONG ARM OF THE LAW
Appointed in 1920 in the wake of the Black Sox scandal, Landis—then a federal judge—was the game’s first commissioner.



HUM IMAGES/UNIVERSAL IMAGES GROUP/GETTY IMAGES

THE GEORGIA-BORN Douglas returned that fall from New York to Birmingham, where he and his first wife, Louise, lived a rather tenuous existence. One particular drunken evening, he beat Louise, leaving her with two black eyes and Phil with a visit from the police. He found employment as a ringer with myriad semi-pro teams, but eventually the Birmingham house was repossessed. Louise died of cancer in 1927, and Phil settled in Tennessee with his daughters. He continued to pitch—and to drink. He was dirt poor, scrambling for various odd jobs, from road work to a coal mine to a sawmill. “He was a perfect grandpa. He was precious to us,” says his granddaughter, Mary Boston. And he seldom missed a Wednesday night church service, dazzling the congregation with his singing voice. Ill health, including three strokes, led to his death in 1952 at age 62.

“I know [the lifetime suspension] ruined our lives. His and ours. It cost us our education, everything,” said Douglas’s daughter, Eunice Douglas Shoemate, in a 1990 interview with the *Philadelphia Inquirer*. Her quotation was part of a series of stories by writer Jay Searcy, who had launched his career in nearby Chattanooga. He wrote that Douglas was “a lovable, caring but saddened figure” who was “too embarrassed. So he died concealing his grief, his guilt and his anger.” Searcy’s initial story was headlined PUNISHMENT THAT DIDN’T FIT THE CRIME. As

DOUGLAS'S DAUGHTER SAID THE LIFETIME SUSPENSION "RUINED OUR LIVES. HIS AND OURS."

FROM TOP: BETTMANN ARCHIVE/GETTY IMAGES; MARK MCCARTER

Douglas told a former teammate, Hillis Layne, "I drank, but I didn't do anything wrong." Searcy's story caught the attention of New Jersey attorney Joseph McCullough Jr., who connected with Tracy City attorney Stephen Greer, the eventual chair of the Committee to Reinstate Phil Douglas, which included Searcy, McCullough, Henry Flury and a brace of family members whose life struggles left them with little hope and even less ammunition to clear Douglas's name. They composed a letter to commissioner Fay Vincent, pleading for a hearing to discuss reinstatement, but Vincent refused. Vincent was following the precedent set a year earlier when his predecessor, Bart Giamatti, turned down pleas on behalf of Shoeless Joe Jackson. It would be another 35 years before Manfred's reprieve.

"When I was reading about the Pete Rose, I was like, 'Well, Phil Douglas, they better include him too,' " says Frizzell. "It was shocking. It was unexpected. But I was really, really happy about it."

Says Boston, "It gave me a chill." But there is a tinge of melancholy. "The saddest thing is, the people that remember him, that were the closest to him, a lot of them have passed away. There's just a few of us in the family now, but still it's a thing to us," Boston adds.

In retrospect, it's easy enough to understand Landis's decision, as he was still dealing with the stench from the Black Sox scandal. The priority of integrity of the game understandably took precedence over the impact of an individual whose alcoholism had more than a little culpability in the situation. Less understandable was the reluctance of ensuing commissioners to review or reverse the decision, even as the court of public sentiment seemed to agree that, well, the punishment didn't fit the crime. As Rich Levin, a spokesman for Vincent, told UPI in 1990, "We have received some written material and we have lawyers who are looking into it. But to be honest with you, it's unlikely that we will attempt to rewrite history."

Yet Manfred, perhaps under pressure from the White House, chose to do just that. It'll be interesting to see how history regards Shufflin' Phil Douglas, a player barely a footnote after Pete Rose and Shoeless Joe Jackson, but a man folks atop the Cumberland Plateau believe to be even more deserving of vindication. □

KOHJIRO KINNO

SCORECARD: PLAYBOOK

SECOND ACT

A FORMER MLB ALL-STAR IS THRIVING IN RETIREMENT

SINCE PLAYING his last major league game in 2021, former outfielder Dexter Fowler hasn't slowed down. He's become a part owner of Premier League team AFC Bournemouth, started a production company and worked as a TV analyst, among other ventures.

As part of a video series called *The Playbook*, which was created by SPORTS ILLUSTRATED and *Entrepreneur*, Fowler recently sat down with Mikey Tanha to talk business. Tanha is the cofounder and CEO of Noble 33, an eco-friendly hospitality company whose restaurants will soon include the Kansas City steakhouse 1587 Prime, a partnership with Chiefs stars Patrick Mahomes and Travis Kelce. Fowler and Tanha found they have quite a bit in common. An edited excerpt of their discussion follows. For the full conversation, visit SI.com.

Fowler: *So tell me about your background.*

Tanha: I was born in Iran.

Fowler: *Really? My wife's Iranian.*

Tanha: Nice. It was during the revolution in 1980. I was literally born in a war, and my parents, when I was 2 years old, decided, *You know what? We're not having our son grow up in this environment. We want to move somewhere where he has opportunities.* So they made the ultimate sacrifice for me. So we moved to Northern California. My mom left her whole family. My dad left most of his family and his career. And that sacrifice was for me. And so that stays with me. That drives me to be successful because I want to make sure that they feel good about their decision.

So tell me about you.

Fowler: *I was born and raised in Atlanta. My mom used to ask me, 'What do you want to be when you grow up?' I'd say, 'A businessman.'*

COMMON GROUND
Fowler, who played 14 seasons in the majors, and Tanha (center) have similar backgrounds.

That's what I would always say. I love getting in a suit and tie. I just love to dress up. My dad was the director of global accounts for Kimberly Clark. I'd see him getting in a suit and tie going to work, and I'd think, I want to be like dad.

My mom was a teacher …

Tanha: My mom was a professor.

Fowler: *Love it. My mom taught elementary school. I promised my parents when I got drafted—I said, 'Hey look, I'm going to [Penn State] just to play baseball. I promise you when I'm retired, I'm going to go back to school and get my degree.'*

I kept my promise. I didn't have to go back to school, but I went back and graduated. So that was my upbringing. But [since] then, all these opportunities have popped up. I'm part owner in the English Premier League. Through my business mentors or sitting on boards, I'm learning. You talk to different people, you're rubbing shoulders with all these people, and iron sharpens iron.

Tanha: So we're going into a lot of new markets and there's a business side of it, and then there's the community side of it. So when we go into a new market, we obviously do our analysis on whether or not the restaurant can be successful. We take into consideration, demographics, marketing, competition, etc.

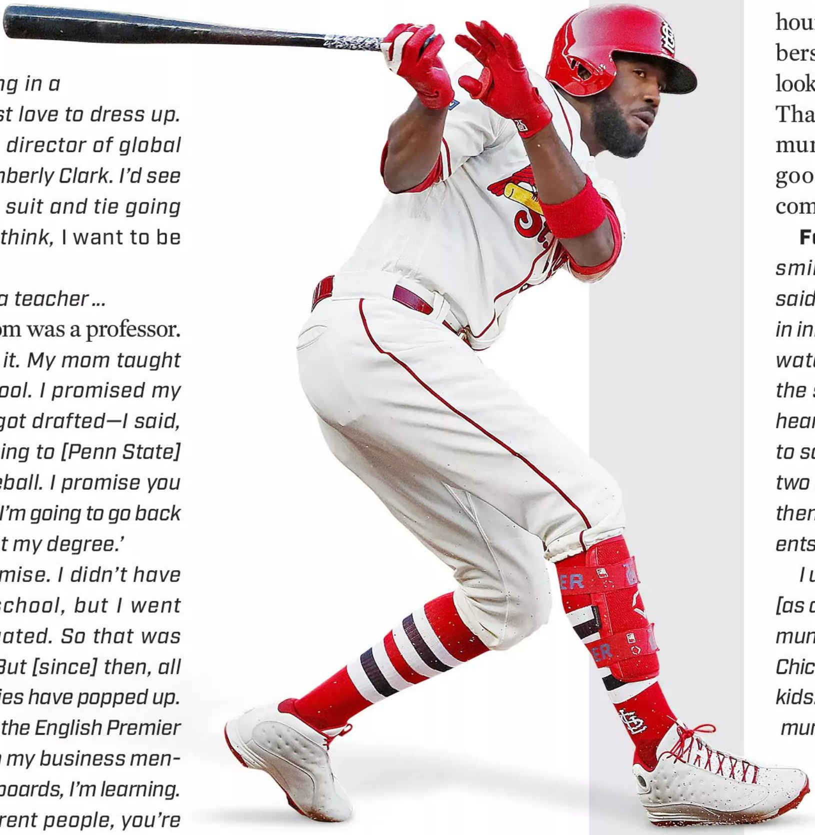
But then there's a community side to it. We don't want to go into a new market and take, we want to go into a new community and a new market with the mindset of giving. And so my business partner, Tosh Berman, and our CMO, Matt Smith, they actually came up with a program called Noble Neighbors.

It's basically a corporate responsibility program we're launching next year, where in every new market that we're going, we'll select family-owned restaurants—mom and pops that have been open for a couple years, that are doing O.K. They have their culinary down, but they need to get over the hump in one aspect or another, whether it's operational efficiency or marketing or getting funding. And we'll put our team on it.

I love that we'll spend a couple hours a week with our team members helping them, diving in and looking to get them over the hump. That way we're giving to the community that we're going into. It's good for them, it's good for the community, it's good for us.

Fowler: *I love that. That puts a smile on my face. My mom, like I said, was a teacher and she taught in inner city schools in Marietta. And watching her go in, and [hearing] the stories of the kids … It hurts my heart to say that they're really going to school to learn and to get maybe two meals, breakfast and lunch, and then when they go home, their parents are at work.*

I used to go talk to kids all the time [as a player], giving back to the community. Whether I was in St. Louis or Chicago, [I'd] go to schools and talk to kids. To have something in their community that they can actually lean on, that's not too far out of their grasp, that's awesome. Words can't describe that. □



DAVID E. KLUTHO

SHOOTING STAR

HAPPY GILMORE 2 SHOWCASES THE GOLF WORLD'S FAVORITE FICTIONAL VILLAIN

▸ BY MARK BECHTEL

I **AM A** nice guy," insists Christopher McDonald. And after talking to him for a few minutes, it becomes clear that he is—very much so, in fact.

But when a role calls for a little smarm—or a lot of it—the 70-year-old admits, "I've got it in me."

That bad guy energy was most famously on display in 1996's *Happy Gilmore,* in which he played obnoxious pro golfer Shooter McGavin. "I do like [being the villain] because you get carte blanche," says McDonald. "It's like, 'Hey, bring it, whatever you got.' I just think it's a blast, because it's like total opposite of me. I love doing that kind of stuff, because without a really good bad guy, it doesn't help out the hero."

The actor's career has been filled with a wide range of roles: He was in Darren Aronofsky's wonderful-but-oh-so-bleak *Requiem for a Dream* and was nominated for an Emmy in 2022 for his work in the comedy *Hacks*. But he freely admits that when he's recognized, "99% of the time" it's for playing Shooter. So when the opportunity came up to reprise the role in *Happy Gilmore 2*, McDonald jumped at it. In fact, he had been pestering star Adam Sandler to make a sequel (which premieres on Netflix on July 25) for years—partly because it's virtually guaranteed to be a success and partly because he had so much fun filming the first one.

HAPPY PLACE

McDonald got back together with Sandler after encouraging him to take a shot at a sequel.

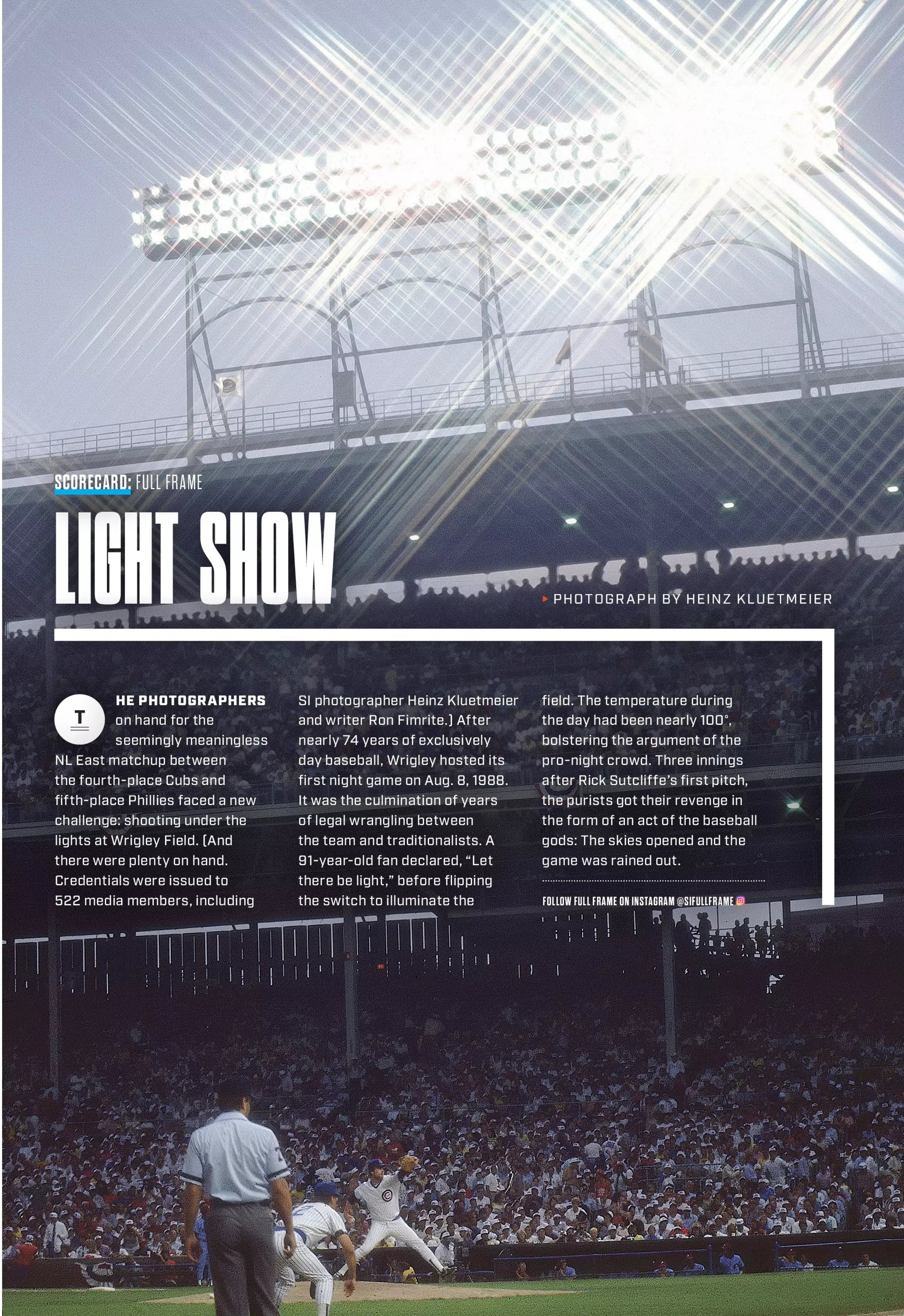
It's often been said that every hockey player's favorite movie is *Slap Shot*. Judging by the cast of *Happy Gilmore 2*, the original made a lasting impression on more people than McDonald. Cameos from players abound, including Scottie Scheffler, Rory McIlroy and Bryson DeChambeau. In one scene, the pros are all assembled in one room. Says McDonald, "I walked in right between their setups, and every one of them, the younger guys and the older guys, they were pulling the guns out, going, 'Shooter.' The hair on the back my neck was tingly. I talked to Jack Nicklaus for two hours." (McDonald plays in a dozen or so charity events a year, which suits his skills: "I got game in a scramble," he says. "That's my forte.")

The sequel finds Shooter and Happy both down on their luck, which leads to a movie that's not nearly as silly as the original. Sandler isn't in full *Uncut Gems* mode, but he does bring a little more dramatic heft to the role now than he did 29 years ago. "Adam has depth," says McDonald. "And this movie is really about family. These are big, big themes."

Which is not to say the movie isn't funny (it is) or that it distances itself from the first film. References to the original are everywhere, but not in the annoying let's-just-do-the-same-thing-we-did-then way that bogs down so many sequels. Familiar faces are back, but not all of them. Carl Weathers, the actor who played Chubbs, died earlier this year, but his spirit lives on in a training montage that seems inspired by a similar scene in *Rocky 2*, in which Weathers played Apollo Creed. Says McDonald, "The people that we pay homage to in this sequel are a big part of the film." The result is a movie that's lighter on broad humor but deeper on heart.

So would McDonald be up for another go-round? "I would love to do a third, but who knows? I mean, it took this long to get this one done," he says. Even if it doesn't happen, being back in character and on set with Sandler and the gang is enough. He's not Mr. Gilmore, but, he adds, "I'm over-the-moon happy." □

SCOTT YAMANO/NETFLIX



SCORECARD: FULL FRAME

LIGHT SHOW

▸ PHOTOGRAPH BY HEINZ KLUETMEIER

THE PHOTOGRAPHERS on hand for the seemingly meaningless NL East matchup between the fourth-place Cubs and fifth-place Phillies faced a new challenge: shooting under the lights at Wrigley Field. (And there were plenty on hand. Credentials were issued to 522 media members, including SI photographer Heinz Kluetmeier and writer Ron Fimrite.) After nearly 74 years of exclusively day baseball, Wrigley hosted its first night game on Aug. 8, 1988. It was the culmination of years of legal wrangling between the team and traditionalists. A 91-year-old fan declared, “Let there be light,” before flipping the switch to illuminate the field. The temperature during the day had been nearly 100°, bolstering the argument of the pro-night crowd. Three innings after Rick Sutcliffe’s first pitch, the purists got their revenge in the form of an act of the baseball gods: The skies opened and the game was rained out.

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FACES IN THE CROWD

▸ BY DAN FALKENHEIM

NOMINATE NOW

To submit a candidate for Faces in the Crowd, email **faces@si.com.**

MARIA JOSÉ MARIN ▸ Sport: Golf ▸ Hometown: Cali, Colombia

José Marin, a sophomore at Arkansas, won the NCAA Division I women's golf championship, shooting a 12-under-par 276 to tie the third-best score in championship history. The SEC Player of the Year and the winner of the Honda Sport Award in golf, José Marin made the cut and finished 55th at the U.S. Women's Open less than two weeks after her title win. As of mid-June, she was ranked fifth in the World Amateur Golf Rankings.

CAMRYN THOMAS ▸ Sport: Track and Field ▸ Hometown: Toms River, N.J.

Thomas, a senior at Toms River North High, broke the Ocean County record in the 400-meter hurdles (51.96) and ran a 48.76 split in the 4 × 400 relay, winning titles in both events at the NJSIAA Meet of Champions. In May he ran a 13.70 split in the 4 × 100 shuttle hurdles relay to help the Mariners break the national high school record (55.93). Thomas, who also won three consecutive football state titles, will run track for Rider.

HANNAH WELLS ▸ Sport: Softball ▸ Hometown: Coahoma, Texas

Wells, a senior at Coahoma High, homered, doubled, walked, scored two runs and threw nine strikeouts in a 6–1 victory against Lexington High, leading the Bulldogettes to their third consecutive Class 3A Division II title win. Named the Gatorade National Softball Player of the Year, the Texas commit batted .602, hit a state single-season record 31 home runs and had a 22–1 record on a 0.49 ERA with 258 strikeouts.

LACROSSE

Blue Bond

▸ **NORTH CAROLINA** freshman attacker Chloe Humphrey (*right*) had dreamt of winning a national championship since sixth grade. What she didn't expect was that her older sisters, Ashley (*left*) and Nicole, would be her teammates during that moment. Chloe scored four goals while Ashley, a graduate student, had four assists as UNC beat Northwestern 12–8 to win the program's fourth national title.

"We talked about it all summer," says Chloe. "It's a surreal feeling."

Nicole's transfer back to UNC for a sixth year placed the three sisters from Darien, Conn., on the same team for the first time ever. The results were historic: Chloe became the first freshman to be named the top women's college lacrosse player, while Ashley set the NCAA career assists record.

"We have three national championship trophies sitting in our kitchen," says Ashley. "It's a dream come true." □

FROM TOP: ARKANSAS ATHLETICS; COURTESY OF TOMS RIVER REGIONAL SCHOOL DISTRICT; COURTESY OF ALEXANDER OROSCO; ANDREW KATSAMPES/ISI PHOTOS/GETTY IMAGES

JOEL **EMBIID**

BROOKE **HENDERSON**

JULIUS **RANDLE**

SKECHERS
HANDS FREE
Slip-ins

WE ALL WENT
HANDS FREE.

SKECHERS SLIP-INS
CONTOUR FOAM

HARRY **KANE**

RICKEA **JACKSON**

MATT **FITZPATRICK**

SKECHERS.COM

Shot at **The Social House, Cincinnati**
Styling by **Kyle Smith**
Grooming by **Ja'Twon Henderson**
and **Darnell Bonner**

Shirt by **ZEGNA**
Jacket and pants by **NAHMIAS**

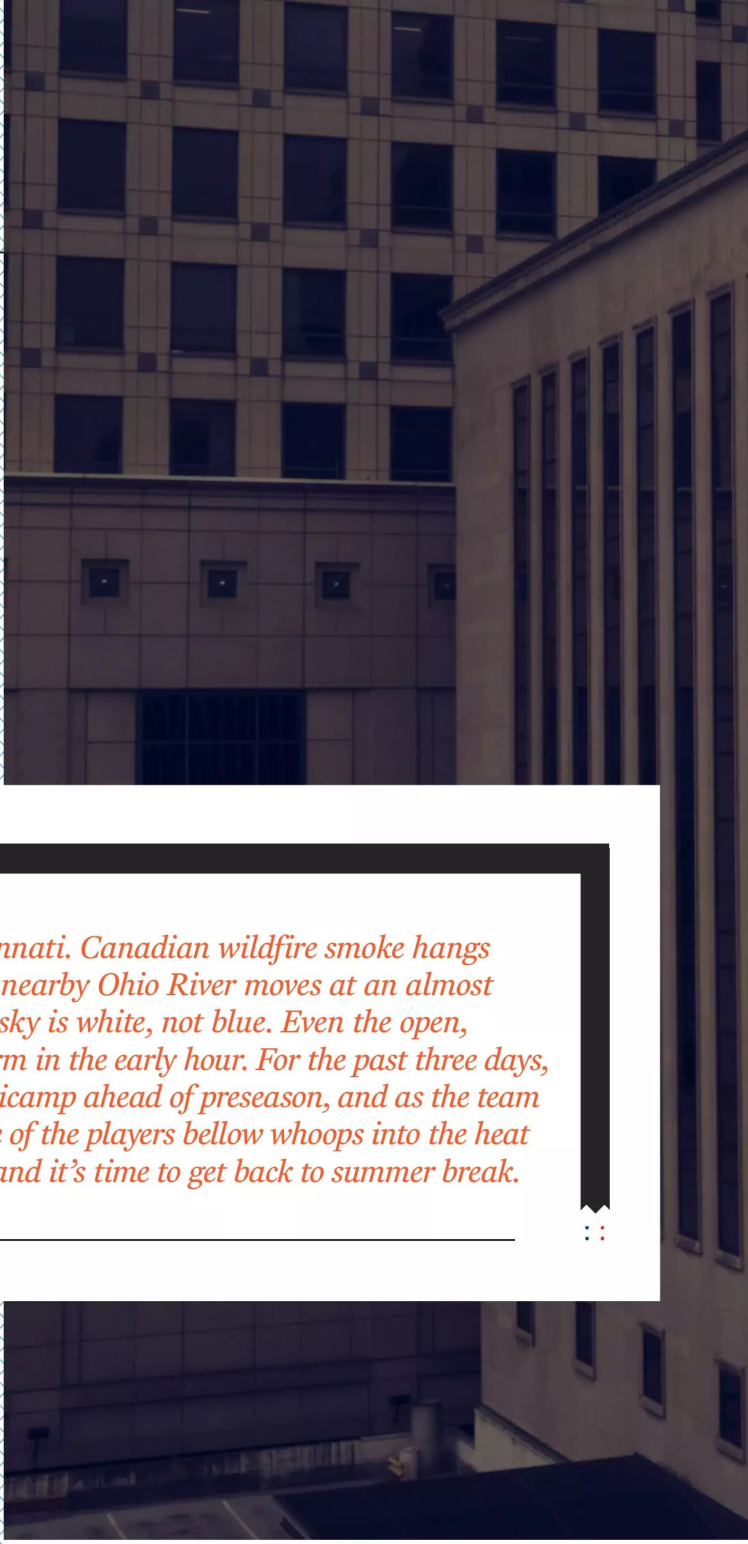
THE FIT IS LIT

SPORTS & STYLE

Sports and fashion are more intertwined than ever, with statement-making stars like **JOE BURROW** *at the forefront of a movement where athletes are dominating our feeds and defining a new era of style influence*

by **Nick Remsen**

photographs by **Clay Patrick McBride**



IT'S A MUGGY JUNE *morning in Cincinnati. Canadian wildfire smoke hangs in the humid air like pulp in soft focus, and the nearby Ohio River moves at an almost imperceptible crawl. Despite it being sunny, the sky is white, not blue. Even the open, concrete-framed halls of Paycor Stadium are warm in the early hour. For the past three days, the Bengals have been holding a mandatory minicamp ahead of preseason, and as the team exits the field and heads to the locker room, some of the players bellow whoops into the heat of the arena's corridors: The camp has finished, and it's time to get back to summer break.*

Joe Burrow, the Bengals' Pro Bowl quarterback, is the last guy to come through the tunnel. He stayed outside to put in a little more work. There's other media around, mostly tossing questions at coach Zac Taylor as to how minicamp has gone—or about the unresolved contract disputes between Bengals ownership and defensive ends Trey Hendrickson (who led the NFL in sacks last season) and Shemar Stewart, a rookie. Burrow sidesteps that pod and asks if I'd like to talk with him away from the fray, while ... he's lifting?

The setting and setup are unconventional—but apropos, given our topics of conversation: style, Burrow's prominent embrace of it, and the way fashion has become more tightly entwined than ever with sports in recent years. Over the past half decade or so, these once-disparate worlds have been pulled together by a heavier, more urgent gravity—and Burrow stands as one of the highest-profile fixtures at the intersection. To a certain crowd, he might well be known more for his bold, fun, sometimes oddball outfits than for his arm. Here, inside the (much cooler) training facilities at Paycor, he's squat-pressing hundreds of pounds and still in his practice pinny, but talking about "Gucci fits" and "getting away from classic suits." As far as sporting and sartorial spheres colliding goes, it doesn't get much closer than this.

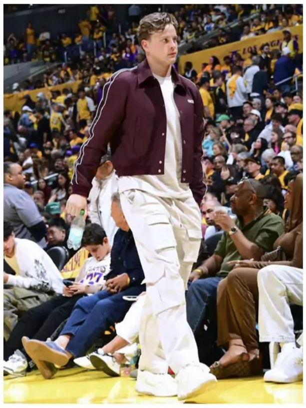
Burrow, 28, has made fashion waves for an aesthetic that he doesn't really label, preferring to keep it open-ended and mood dependent. "My sense of style varies day-to-day," he says. "I wake up, feel the color and find

Shirt, jacket and sunglasses by **PRADA**

the fit that matches what I'm looking for." He describes his presentation, simply, as "my own."

Kyle Smith—one of Burrow's stylists who, in 2024, also became the NFL's very first dedicated fashion editor—later says, with a laugh, that "Joe loves color in a way that I don't. It's a fun exercise to figure out what color of the day he's into." Smith then adds: "He doesn't necessarily pay attention to what's trending or what everybody else is wearing, and that's what makes [his style] so unique. He is always doing his own thing. I think a big part of the Joe fandom is an appreciation of his fashion. Or, at least, his individuality expressed through fashion."

What Burrow's instincts have totaled to is a sui generis look, and it often ranges: One game, he might arrive in a knitted hoodie paneled in different hues, the next, a weighty black woven leather jacket from the luxe Italian label Bottega Veneta and the next, a matching zippered top and flared-bottom set accented with wraparound, wavy rainbow stripes.



FROM LEFT: KEVIN MAZUR/MG25/GETTY IMAGES FOR THE MET MUSEUM/VOGUE; ADAM PANTOZZI/NBAE/GETTY IMAGES; DAVE BENETT/GETTY IMAGES FOR SPOTIFY; RICHARD BORD/WIREIMAGE/GETTY IMAGES

> *“Joe always looks great,” says* Vogue *global editorial director Anna Wintour. “He has* **TONS OF CONFIDENCE** *and is up for trying new things—that seems natural to who he is.”*

“I’m into decoration, flowers, butterflies, all that cool stuff,” Burrow says. He wears a lot of footwear from Rick Owens, the Californian-born independent designer known for his semi-gothic and unorthodox approach. Likewise diamonds and jewelry from the Houston-based Leo Khusro. (In terms of fashion dislikes, Burrow doesn’t necessarily love shorts below the knee or the color red.) Back in 2022, Burrow posted an Instagram photo of himself in a black turtleneck, a mottled gray parka and rimless sunglasses from the French jewelry house Cartier. He captioned it with a lyric from the song “Yes Indeed” by Drake and Lil Baby: “Cartier glasses, I won’t even peek at you.” The shades struck a chord online, and the image has racked up 1.6 million likes. They’ve since become a Burrow signature. In 2024, Burrow debuted close-cropped and bleached platinum hair, which he says he “thought about adding some pink to.” (It’s not off the table in the future, he says.)

All of this has amounted to a singular style identity and has complemented—if not contributed to—the various nicknames that encapsulate his on-field poise, laid-back demeanor and swagger: Joe Brrr, Joe Shiesty and, most commonly, Joe Cool.

Anna Wintour, the chief content officer of Condé Nast and global editorial director of *Vogue*—who is widely considered to be the fashion industry’s most influential figure—says: “Joe always looks great. He has tons of confidence and is up for trying new things—that seems natural to who he is. It was wonderful to see him at the Met Gala this year in Gucci. Blue suited him.”

The Met Gala is the Metropolitan Museum of Art’s annual fundraising event for its Costume Institute wing, and Burrow’s outfit in May included a slightly oversized Gucci double-breasted jacket rendered in heron blue, which he wore with, yes, Cartier sunglasses. (Also, as it happens, in the words of Wintour, her daughter Bee Carrozzini is a “fanatical Bengals fan.”)

Analytically speaking, Burrow’s wardrobe game is chameleonic, yet it does feature consistent pillars: It’s polychrome, it usually only hints at his physique (rather than showing it off), and it’s somehow nonchalant yet equally, totally self-assured.

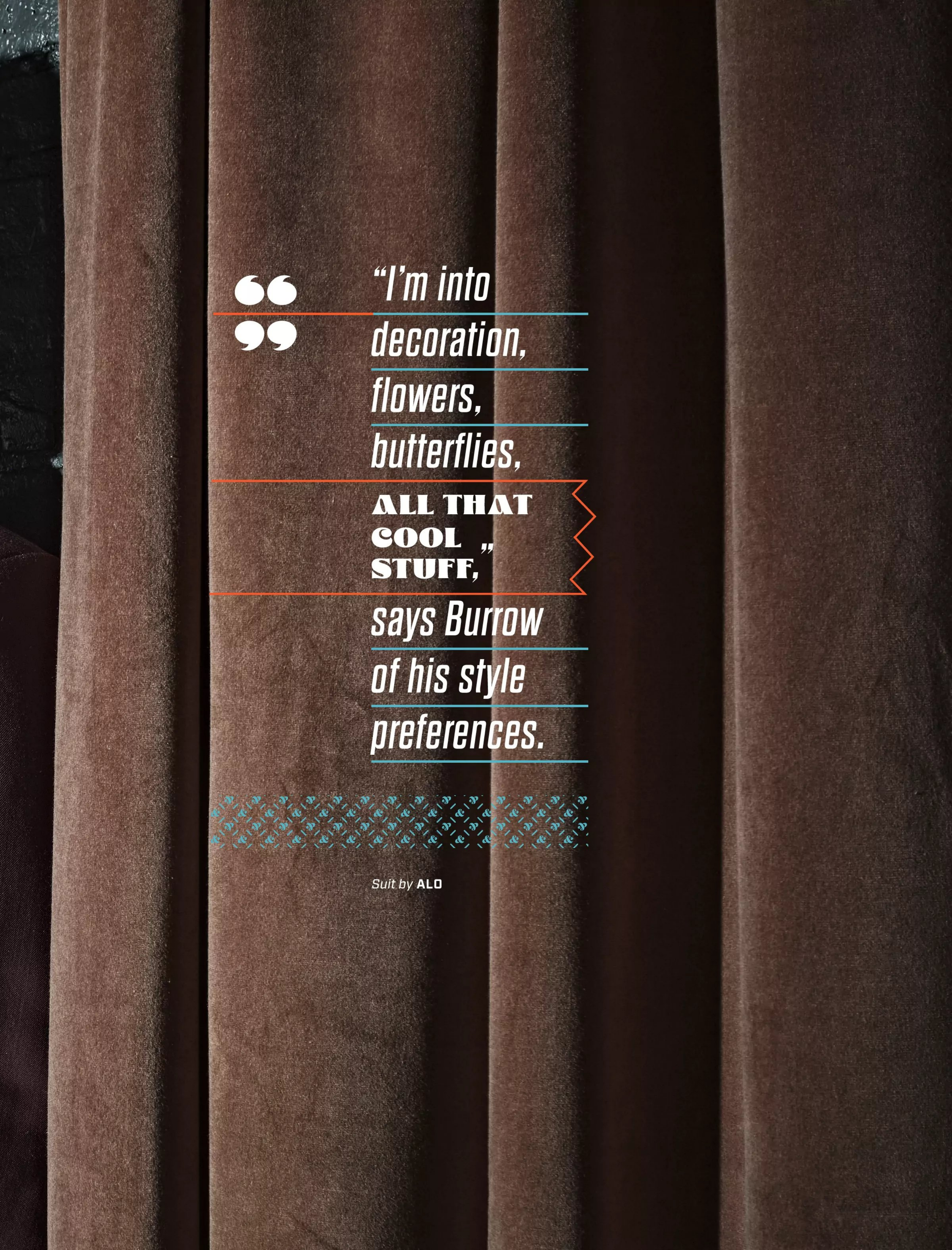
“My mom was in fashion when I was little,” says Burrow. “So I was around it. I was always pretty particular about what I wore, like when we’d be school shopping. I didn’t know anything, I just liked how the clothes felt and looked. I struggled [with confidence] when I was little. I was pretty uncomfortable in my own skin, and I think I was quiet and socially awkward, so I did express myself with colors and clothes.” Burrow’s mother, Robin, was a fashion buyer during her son’s early youth—and despite Burrow’s current deep industry access and pockets, she still has an eye for things her son might like or might have missed, and she’ll send clothing or accessory gifts around Christmas or his birthday.

Even though Burrow says he was interested in expressive clothing during his childhood, he entered his rookie

Jet-Setter

From the Met Gala in New York City (far left), to courtside at the 2025 NBA playoffs in L.A., to events in Cannes, Burrow's style game has global appeal.

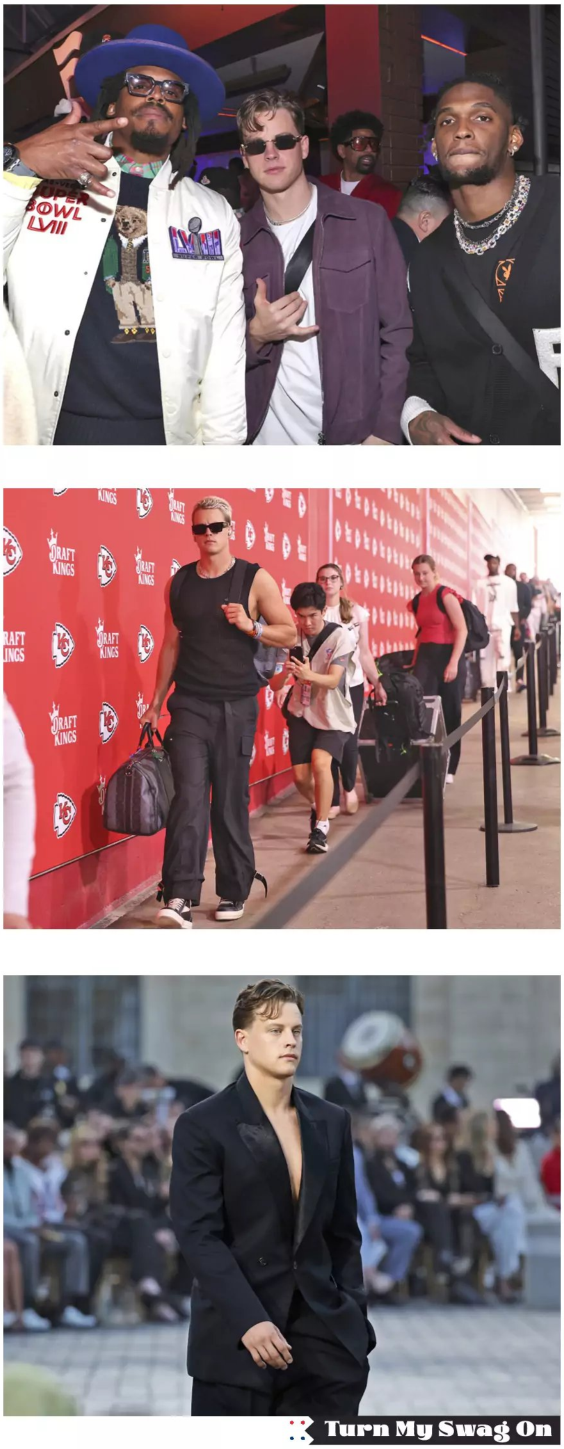
Coat by **GUCCI**
Shirt by **JOHN VARVATOS**
Shorts by **DHRUV KAPOOR**
Bag by **ALO**



> “I’m into decoration, flowers, butterflies, **ALL THAT COOL STUFF,**” says Burrow of his style preferences.

Suit by **ALO**

Shirt by
ZEGNA
Jacket by
NAHMIAS



Turn My Swag On

In ’24, Burrow wore his signature shades for a Super Bowl party and arrival to Arrowhead, but he kept it clean to walk the Vogue World: Paris runway.

FROM TOP: KEVIN MAZUR/GETTY IMAGES FOR FANATICS; JAMIE SQUIRE/GETTY IMAGES; PASCAL LE SEGRETAIN/GETTY IMAGES FOR VOGUE

year in 2020 wearing “nothing but suits into the games, and I was just super uncomfortable,” he says. “I just simply don’t enjoy wearing that kind of clothing all that often. I didn’t like getting on a plane in a full suit, sitting there for three hours and not being comfortable.”

Thus, spurred by a need to satisfy, as Burrow puts it, “utility,” his style morphed—perhaps back towards its natural mode—into something more casual and streetwear-based, though he does still layer in modernized takes on suits. One example is a backless jacket made by designer Peter Do that Burrow wore, to viral discussion, during a *Vogue*-produced fashion show in Paris last summer.

> “More young women, or people who might not have cared about football, are **PAYING ATTENTION** to what [players] are wearing,” Burrow says.

Between 2020 and now, a starting-to-simmer change in perspective around the way men dress has turned into a white-hot paradigm shift, with professional male athletes among its most visible vanguard. Many are espousing individualistic flair and leaning on it to help forge their personas away from the field. The same is also true of female athletes, but, generally speaking, fashion has long been closer linked to women than men. We are still in a nascent era of people like Burrow—or Shai Gilgeous-Alexander, Francisco Lindor or Lewis Hamilton—using standout stylistic points of view to not only satisfy their own aesthetic preferences, but also to attract new eyes and amass bigger audiences. The skyrocketing of social media’s influence during the COVID-19 era has helped with this exposure.

“I think the younger crowd is very for it,” says Burrow. “I also think [different styles] bring a different demographic to the game. I think more young women, or people who might not have known or cared about football at all beforehand, are paying attention to what people are wearing in the tunnel. Maybe they see somebody wearing a Gucci fit into the game, and they’re like, ‘Oh, that’s pretty cool, who’s that?’ And then they start paying attention. I do think it brings more fans, honestly.”

Burrow’s use of the word “utility” is interesting, too, because with the brightening spotlight on athletes’ tastes, more major fashion brands have come calling: The industry is finding great use (and profit) in aligning with sports like never before. Louis Vuitton, the well-known French megabrand, announced in June that it is a new partner of Real Madrid’s men’s and women’s soccer teams. Burberry, the British luxury label, recently entered the tennis space by signing agreements with top-10 players Jack Draper and Tommy Paul. Prada moved quickly to dress Caitlin Clark at the 2024 WNBA draft, while this year, Coach struck a multiyear deal with the league to be its official handbag partner. (There are many, many more examples.) Burrow himself has a partnership with Alo, the premium athletic apparel brand.

"Athletes are dominating the culture now—they're our heroes, our role models, and they define what's relevant," says Wintour. "I think it's because there's nothing that can compete with the excitement of live sports. And athletes often have the confidence to step into different worlds—out of their comfort zones sometimes."

In his fashion editor role with the NFL, Smith is tasked with managing and creating content for the league's social media platforms; helping players find their individual style; and building relationships with fashion brands. He notes that—unlike influencers or traditional celebrities who often make use of sponsored placements or loaned samples for photo opportunities—many athletes choose to buy their clothes for public appearances.

"In the NFL, the athletes can't be paid to promote something in the tunnel, so what they're wearing and what they're doing is authentic," Smith says. "I think that authenticity is what consumers and audiences are desperate for. They want to know [that] someone genuinely believes in the product. I think that's very powerful."

To some among men's sports' fan bases, seeing this sartorial evolution—and, really, this departure from long-entrenched tenets of masculinity—isn't always well-received. There are always going to be keyboard warriors talking trash about how all the hype around style detracts from an athlete's focus. Burrow admits that he thinks "some of the football traditionalists might be a little anti" when he wears and generates buzz around an outfit that might be deemed unorthodox—or that former Wrangler pitchman Brett Favre wouldn't look twice at. When asked if the reactions and comments ever get to him, he tilts his head as if the answer should be obvious. "No. Not at all. If I'm comfortable, if I feel good, then, I like it," he says before crouching down for another set of presses.

Though there is a burgeoning focus on highlighting players' personalities and passions away from the stadium—a "helmets-off strategy," as the NFL's senior vice president of social, influencer and content marketing Ian Trombetta has said—football comes first. The game is the job in the end.

"It's a grind. It's monotonous, but it's what I love to do," says Burrow when asked about what he might be preparing differently—or not—going into the fall. Expectations are high this year: The Bengals just missed the playoffs with a 9–8 record last season, yet Burrow was the league leader in passing yards (4,918) and touchdown passes (43). Burrow suggests that he's thinking about "the day-to-day" during the offseason, but he's cognizant of calibrating a balance—and disciplining a stronger pattern into it. "I do tweak my workout routines every year, and my travel schedule, trying to figure out what's best to give my body a break," he says. "If you can't develop a routine and stick to it, then you're not going to be able to be your best on Sundays, in my opinion. I've never seen anybody that doesn't have a

EIGHT WHO DRESS TO THE NINES

As sports and fashion continue to collide, these trendsetting stars have distinguished themselves as the world's most stylish

SHAI GILGEOUS-ALEXANDER NBA

Many would argue the NBA's reigning MVP is also its MFP—most fashionable player. He takes sartorial risks and is often spotted with coveted, hard-to-get pieces like limited-edition luxury bags or trousers from popular Malibu-based label Chrome Hearts.

COCO GAUFF Tennis

The two-time Grand Slam winner wins major style points. Her offhand, cool aesthetic has caught the attention of luxury brands such as Miu Miu. Earlier this year, Gauff oversaw a much-hyped collaboration between that label and her primary sponsor, New Balance.

FROM TOP: MICHAEL KIRSCHBAUM/NBAE/GETTY IMAGES; MUSTAFA YALCIN/ANADOLU/GETTY IMAGES

very disciplined routine go out and be great. Doesn't mean it's not possible, but it's certainly not possible for me." Within this regimen, he is conscious to bake in things like "eating right," hanging out with friends—this summer, that may include a fossil-hunting trip to Wyoming—and "valuable" time off.

Might Burrow's extracurriculars ever include his own foray into clothing design? We've seen it in the crossover before, and Burrow already consults with Alo on custom pieces, but these don't go to market.

"Maybe, when I have a little more time on my hands, I'll have a brand where I work with multiple designers," Burrow says. "Down the road, that would be cool."

Ultimately, Burrow's outlook on the dovetailing of sports and style is rooted in what he sees as a shared inventiveness.

"They [operate in] completely different worlds, but designers and athletes … we're both artists in our own ways," he says. "Theirs is with clothes, ours is with our bodies. There's a lot of creativity in what we do. It's definitely different realms, but there are very creative people in both. It feels like a natural merging." ▢

LEWIS HAMILTON Formula One

Dapper yet always on trend and unafraid of bold moments, the Ferrari driver's fashion credentials run deep: A longtime style icon in F1, Hamilton has his own clothing brand, Plus 44, and served as a co-chair of the 2025 Met Gala in New York City.

FRANCISCO LINDOR MLB

The Mets' shortstop is arguably one of baseball's most fashionable, known for mixing and matching pieces that complement one another to create a full, singular look. "Mr. Smile" has even worked with Gucci on a custom baseball glove.

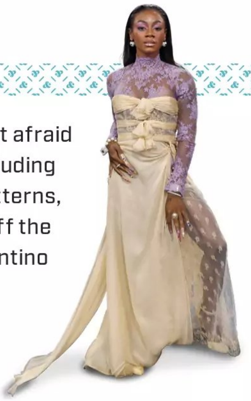
STEFON DIGGS NFL

The Patriots' wide receiver is one of the league's foremost fashion plates. In addition to his own venture, a luxury label called LIEM, Diggs is forward-thinking with his wardrobe, wearing items such as a kilt, a boilersuit and a cropped sweater for game arrivals.

SATOU SABALLY WNBA

The Mercury forward's approach to style combines body-conscious silhouettes and oversized pieces to create a casually cool impression on her 6' 4" frame. No matter the ensemble, Sabally always wears her looks with an unmatched confidence.

SHA'CARRI RICHARDSON Track



The two-time Olympic medalist is not afraid to run in a kaleidoscopic palette, including everything from dip-dyed hair to patterns, pastels and long, decorative nails. Off the track, she wowed in a two-tone Valentino gown at this year's Met Gala *(right)*.

WILLIAM NYLANDER NHL

The Maple Leafs' forward has earned his "Willy Styles" moniker with sharply-tailored fits in both neutrals and hues like lavender and emerald green—except during the playoffs, where, out of superstition, he wore the same brown suit four games in a row. —N.R.

FROM TOP, LEFT TO RIGHT: VINCE MIGNOTT/MB MEDIA/GETTY IMAGES; COLE CARTER/MLB PHOTOS/GETTY IMAGES; STEPHANE CARDINALE/CORBIS/GETTY IMAGES; KATE FRESE/NBAE/GETTY IMAGES; TAYLOR HILL/GETTY IMAGES; NICK TURCHIARO/IMAGN IMAGES

THE
ATHLET
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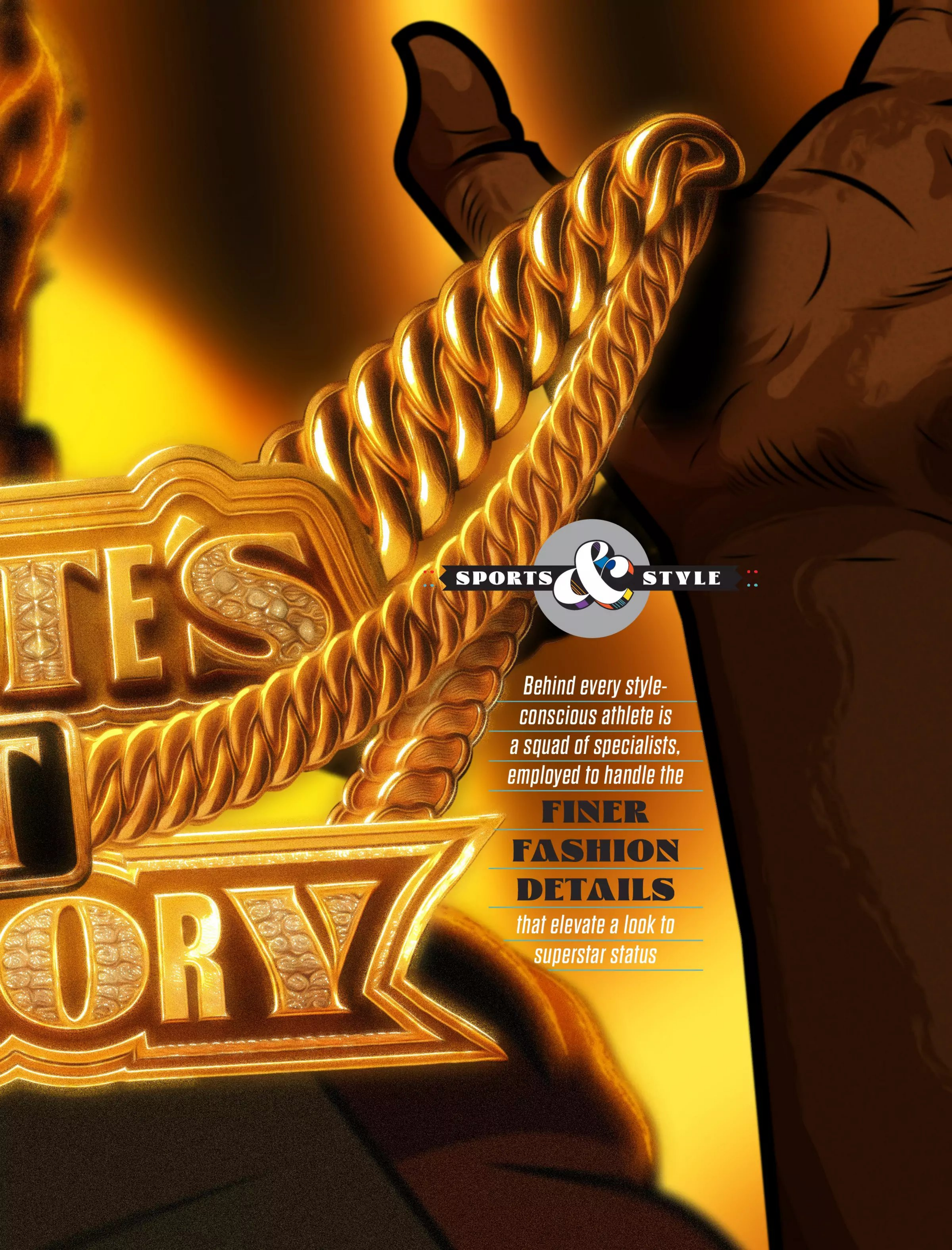
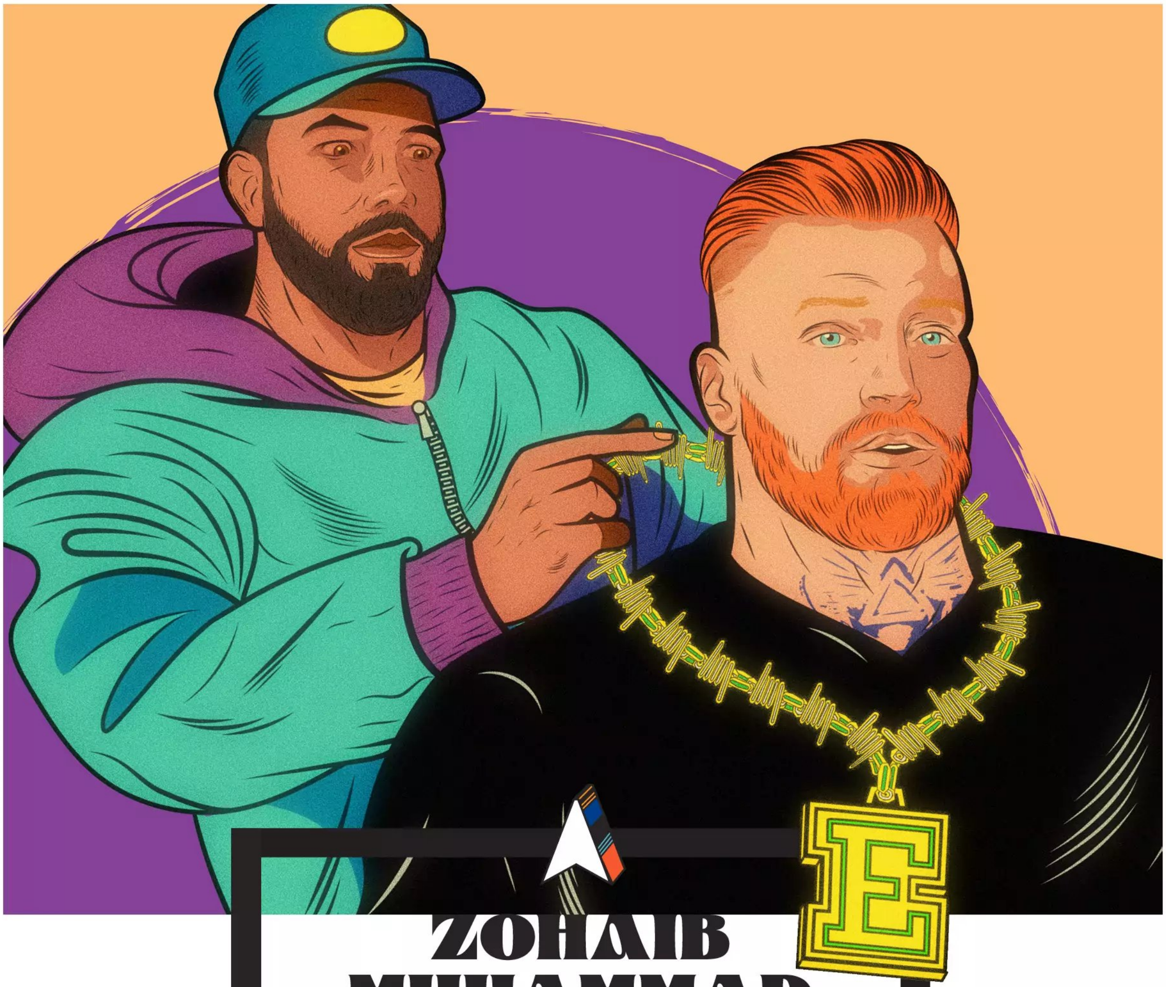
illustrations by
Diego Patiño



SPORTS & STYLE

Behind every style-conscious athlete is a squad of specialists, employed to handle the **FINER FASHION DETAILS** that elevate a look to superstar status



ZOHAIB MUHAMMAD

JEWELER

ZOHAIB MUHAMMAD had just five days to source 3,622 precious stones—3,444 diamonds and 178 emeralds, plus 836.47 grams of rose gold, to be exact—and create a custom design for a three-by-three-inch letter “E” pendant and 22-inch chain with barbed wire details. The Houston-based jeweler—better known as ZoFrost—received the request from his buddy and client, Maxx Crosby. The Raiders’ defensive end was attending a field dedication at Eastern Michigan, his alma mater, and he wanted a showstopper. It needed to be blinged out with gold, diamonds and lots of EMU green. And it needed to be big.

“I don’t know why I said yes,” ZoFrost says. “If one thing went wrong, we wouldn’t have made the deadline. He doesn’t know how much sleep I lost over that piece. He’s a good friend, but I told him, never do that to me again.”

ZoFrost’s showroom houses jewelry for some of the biggest names in the NFL and NBA. He designed the diamond chains and cross pendant that Thunder star Shai Gilgeous-Alexander wore throughout the 2024–25 season. LaMelo Ball has also commissioned several pieces from ZoFrost, including a new Chrome Hearts-inspired, full-mouth grill cast in white gold that was made locally in Houston. ZoFrost says he loves designing for Ball: “That guy keeps you on your toes.”

ZoFrost sources stones and diamonds from the world’s best refineries in India. Of course, he has a large inventory on hand for when requests come in. “I tell clients two weeks, minimum,” he says. “Five days is just crazy.”

Clients approach ZoFrost for all kinds of reasons, like when Bears safety Jonathan Owens commissioned an engagement ring for Simone Biles, a three-carat, oval-cut diamond set on a pavé band. But most of the time, it's to put a show of force behind an athlete's name with a big piece of custom jewelry. Usually, it's a pendant or chain. ZoFrost says, "They worked hard, they made it to the league—it's time to flash out a bit."

Regardless of size, the process remains the same. ZoFrost discusses the idea with his client, like a pendant with a logo, a player's number or a team mascot. After the budget is discussed (often with the help of a financial adviser), the concept moves to mockup, which includes cuts, size, color and style of diamonds and stones. Once a full rendering of the finished product is approved, ZoFrost creates a mold, an exact 3-D replica. Then a casting of the backbone—the infrastructure that holds the stones—is produced. When it all gets set and polished, ZoFrost looks it over for quality control—he aims to operate with the same work ethic and attention to detail his clients put into their sports.

Enormous gold pendants and chains covered in diamonds make a statement on their own, but ZoFrost feels he's part of a changing trend in how players approach fashion. "Athletes are building entire looks around jewelry," he says. "Before you would ice up a bunch of round diamonds, now it's all about how big you can go. A few years ago, I started mixing different cuts and stones, really pushing the design, and now you see it everywhere. The jewelry and the designs have gotten huge. Literally huge."

Championship pendants for the WNBA's Aces, chains for Lamar Jackson, a cross pendant for DeAndre Ayton, Derrick Henry's king pendant—all of it top of the line. But as blingy as his jewelry gets, ZoFrost's start has a simple origin story. "I was selling jewelry in a Houston mall to put myself through school," says the 38-year-old. "Growing up playing, loving sports is a big part of why I'm in this profession. Jewelry has kept me close to the game."

Staying close to players he knew from childhood produced a small circle of professional athletes—a group that has grown into a client base of some of the most recognizable names in sports, primarily through word of mouth. "If somebody in the locker room is wearing your stuff, that's your billboard," ZoFrost says. "If you do good work, and you take care of people, it ultimately leads to some big names."

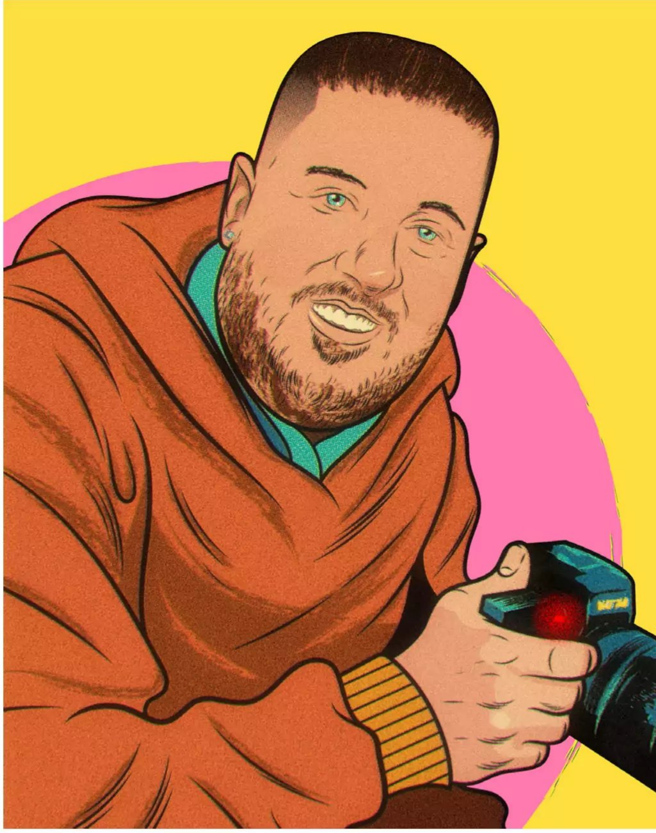
With big names come big pieces. ZoFrost says he's blessed with a career he loves, but if he could make a piece for anyone or anything, it would be a small one. Something littler than a pendant, but with a bigger impact: "I want to make a championship ring," he says. "That would be the ultimate." *—Kim Curzi*

JIM POORTEN

PHOTOGRAPHER

SCROLL THE SOCIAL media timelines of your favorite NBA players and personalities and you will often see a familiar photo credit: Jim Ice. LeBron James at a Lakers game? Jim Ice. Tyrese Haliburton in the conference finals? Jim Ice. Even when he's not credited, if it's from a big moment in a big game, there's a good chance it came from Ice's camera.

Ice, whose real name is Jim Poorten, stumbled into his photography career. A former video coordinator at Seton Hall, Ice joined the NBA in 2006, cutting tape for the league's website. In '09, with the popularity of Twitter (now X) on the rise, the NBA was figuring out how to staff the social sites. Ice volunteered. His first assignment was collecting video from Vince Carter's return



to New Jersey after the guard joined the Magic. Now 41, Ice has been a courtside mainstay ever since.

Ice, officially the NBA's senior manager of social content publishing, largely keeps his lens aimed at the floor. In recent years, though, there has been increasing interest in images from off the court. Players have turned the short walk from the parking lot to the locker room into a makeshift runway to show off pregame fits. James in his Louis Vuitton. Kyle Kuzma in his Pepto-pink Raf Simons sweater. Russell Westbrook, one of the NBA's most daring dressers, once arrived at a game in a photographer's vest.

Shai Gilgeous-Alexander, the reigning MVP, posts more fashion shots than fallaway jumpers on his Instagram. "You can look at some players' pages and not even know they are basketball players," says Ice. "For some, it's mostly just outfits."

Ice traces the interest in pregame style to the 2002 NBA Finals, when Kobe Bryant arrived at the arena for each game in a different throwback jersey. "He used it to pay tribute to others," says Ice, who picked up his nickname from a former Seton Hall staffer who noted his love for throwback jerseys and long chains. "He used it to tell a story with what he was wearing. But that swag, the way he walked, he was putting on a show."

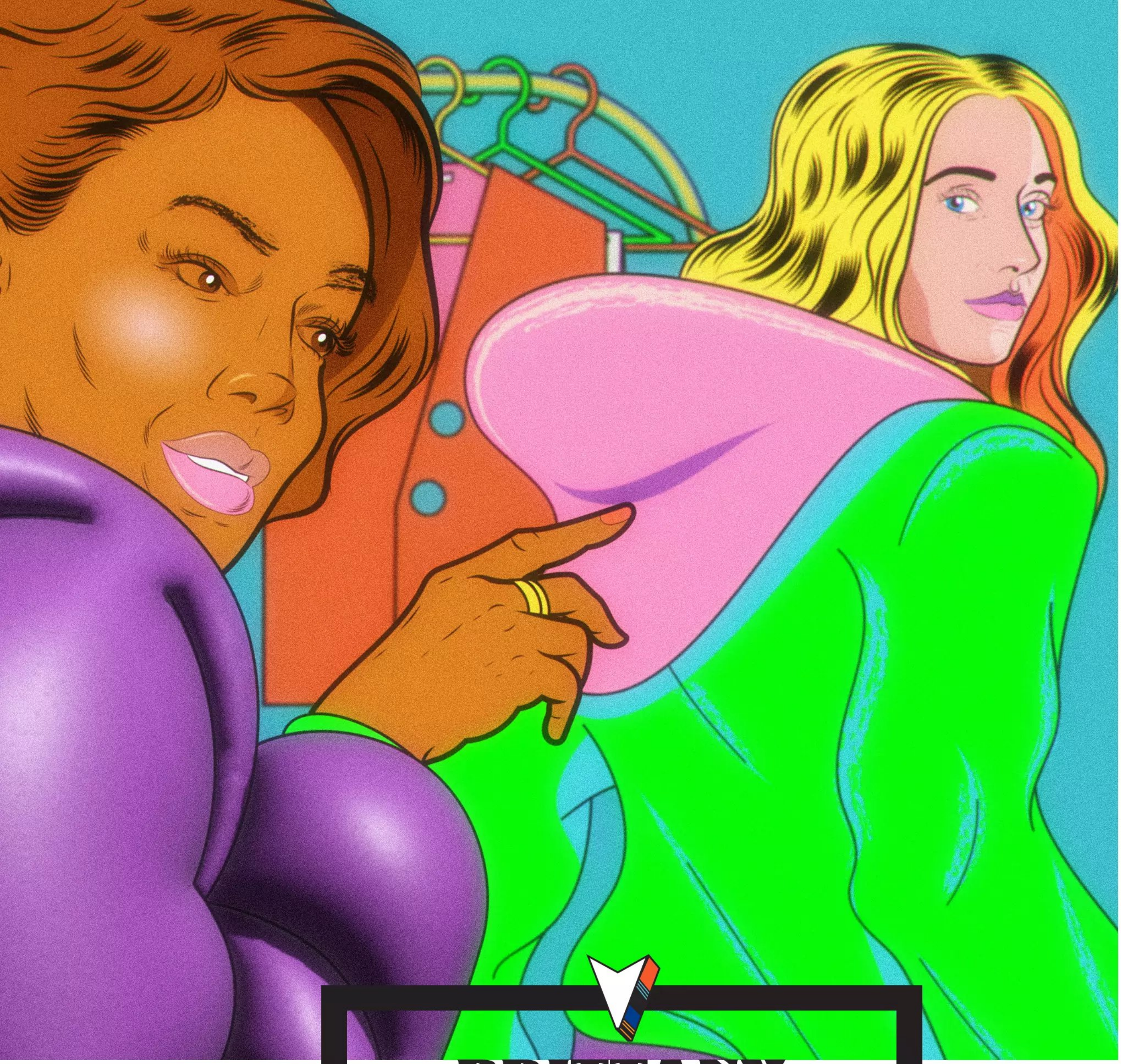
For Ice, fashion has become a critical part of storytelling. Disappearing Instagram Stories became a platform where he could tell the full narrative of a game night "without bombarding the feed." The appetite for details about stars—any details—is insatiable. Everything from shoes to accessories to what kind of headphones a player is wearing generates interest. "It's how we begin our coverage," says Ice.

The Los Angeles-based Ice often arrives at Lakers games five hours before tip-off just to capture James's seconds-long arrival. Once a one-man band, Ice is now a senior leader on a staff of dozens that has given the NBA a nine-figure footprint on its social channels.

Ice laughs at the reach of his fashion photos. Social accounts from *Slam* magazine to *GQ* will pick them up, most more interesting to Annie Leibovitz than Adam Silver. There are accounts solely dedicated to NBA style. Players can pull them off a league-operated Greenfly account but some will still dive into Ice's DMs, hoping that he caught their latest fit.

"The whole job is just the dream come true," says Ice. "I'm not going to lie, the guys notice it too. During the regular season when I'm hopping around, guys will be like, 'Oh, it's a big game. Ice is here.' They'll be happy to see that they're getting the extra coverage from us. It's a blessing, and I guess it's just where I belong." *—Chris Mannix*

> *"You can look at some players' [Instagram] pages and not even know they are basketball players," says Ice, the NBA's senior manager of social content publishing. "For some,* **IT'S MOSTLY OUTFITS."**



BRITTANY HAMPTON

STYLIST

SHLEPPING, SHIPPING and scheduling may seem like the main duties of a UPS driver, but they are critical functions of professional athlete stylists, too.

The increasingly popular job may appear to be all glitz and glamour, with athletes in their red-carpet-ready, designer-laden ensembles, but as Brittany Hampton—stylist to Wings guard Paige Bueckers, Storm forward Nneka Ogwumike, Sparks guard Kelsey Plum, Liberty guard Sabrina Ionescu, tennis player Sloane Stephens, Tigers pitcher Jack Flaherty, Cavs forward Evan Mobley and more—attests, a lot of people don't realize the hours of work, research and logistics that go into each and every look.

"It's a lot of shopping and a lot of returns. And a lot of running around," says the 36-year-old, who has her Hampton Creative Consulting full-time team of six split between New York City and Los Angeles to help fulfill the needs of her clients around the country and across various pro leagues. "We truly are magicians."

Her "start-to-finish" process typically begins with a meeting to gather a full understanding of an athlete's likes and dislikes when it comes to trends, brands, silhouettes, colors and fabrics. From there, Hampton will create a mood board and begin outreach to various fashion labels and designers to start sourcing pieces, before scheduling fittings with the athlete, which can take two to five hours for a season's worth of looks.

"One thing that we've gained privilege to, with the growing intersection between sports and fashion, is that a lot of brands are really open to gifting and loaning, and to helping with those tunnel-look moments," Hampton says. "I think they've realized it's marketable."

A San Francisco native of Filipino descent, Hampton got her start in the industry through her grandmother, who was a fashion designer and set her on a child modeling track. At 16, Hampton started working in retail stores such as Banana Republic, and later studied at the City College of San Francisco and the Fashion Institute of Design & Merchandising in Los Angeles. In 2019, Hampton began working with Russell Westbrook, styling him and his wife, Nina, for five years while also working on his clothing brand, Honor the Gift, which she helped expand into women's and children's lines.

While Hampton plans to sign on additional NFL and MLB athletes this year, it's not a coincidence that the majority of her clients are women, particularly in the WNBA. For years, the league has been recognized and celebrated for its LGBTQ+ inclusion and gender diversity with its players, partners and fans. And that also translates to the athletes' fashion sense and personal style—

TOM MARCHITELLI

TAILOR

FOR HIS ARRIVAL to Game 4 of the NHL's Western Conference finals, Oilers winger Evander Kane chose a cashmere brown and tan striped suit, paired with matching brown and white Nike Dunk Lows. It was the perfect palette to contrast against his neon green Lamborghini Urus, and only one of many striking suits he wore during the playoffs.

There's a strong chance that some of the most memorable garments worn by your favorite NBA, NFL, NHL or MLB players was a custom suit made by Tom Marchitelli, founder of the custom menswear tailoring company Gentleman's Playbook. Joe Burrow's gray and black tiger-striped jacket and pants for Super Bowl LVI; Josh Allen's head-to-toe seafoam green look for the 2023 Kentucky Derby; and any of the 150-plus suits Dak Prescott has commissioned over the last nine years were all made by Marchitelli.

The New Jersey-based designer considers himself a walking billboard. "I'm always in a suit," he says. It's how he met Rob Gronkowski. "I was at a Super Bowl event fitting Todd Gurley and Gronk asked me where I got my suit. I told him I made it, then convinced him he needed [one] for the Super Bowl. I fit him right there." Marchitelli had it done in 72 hours—an icy blue plaid three-piece suit in pure Italian wool, fit to the former tight end's 6'6" frame. As a surprise, he had Gronk's number No. 87 and an image of him spiking the ball embroidered on the jacket's lining. In Gronk's words: "That's what I'm talking about, baby!"

Most of Marchitelli's fabrics are sourced from Italy: wool for a suit that needs to be more functional, silk when the piece moves into more elevated territory. And cashmere is always in play. But everything is sewn in Los Angeles.

A custom suit, which costs between $3,000 and $5,000, takes about three weeks to complete, and it starts with a thorough first fitting, which can last as long as three hours. Marchitelli painstakingly takes measurements of an athlete's chest, arms, wrists, thighs, hips, inseam length and more, then discusses fabric choices, buttons, thread colors and other minute details. The suit is then cut and sewn, and second or third fittings take place for alterations. "I fly to all the fittings," says Marchitelli, 43. "I go over how to wear it, how to button it, how to sit down in it. I want it to fit like a glove. I want my clients to look like a million bucks."

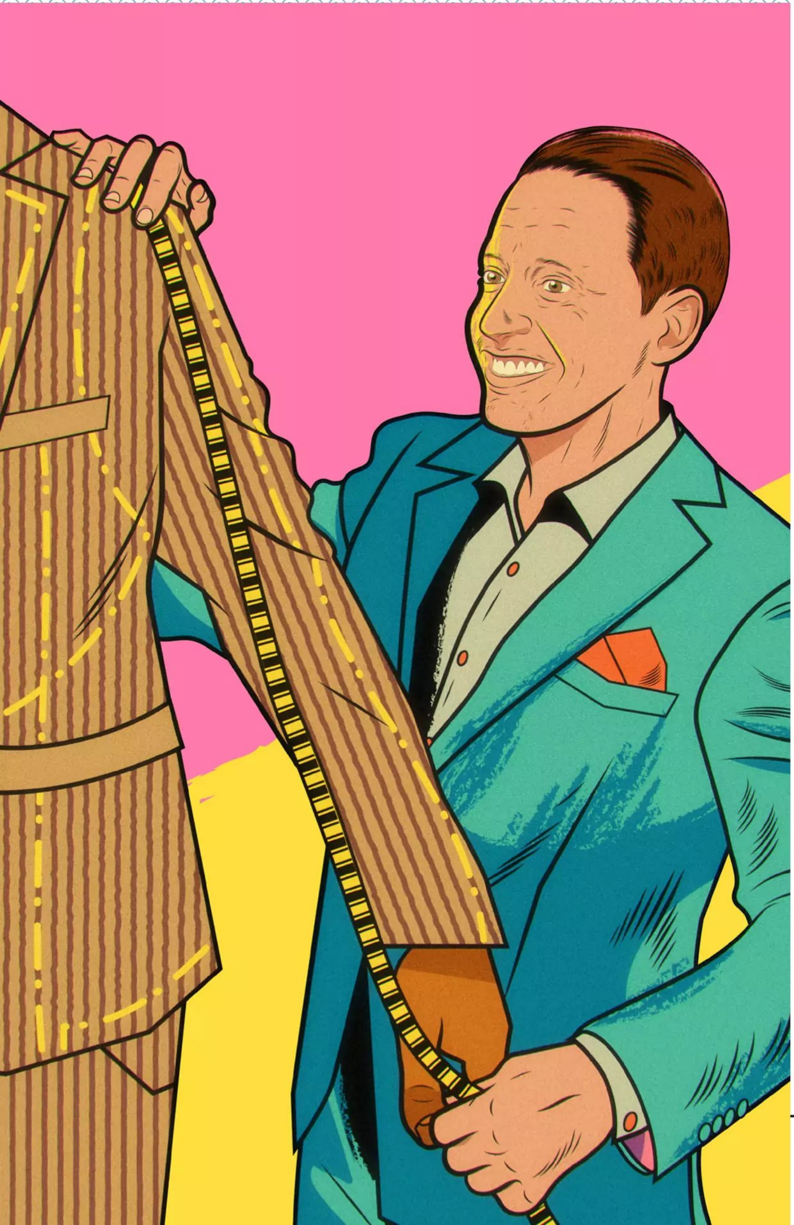
Fitting a range of athletic bodies is all about scale and proportion. Suits need

W players continue to push boundaries and showcase a wide range of preferences, ranging from conventionally feminine to more masculine choices.

"[Hampton has] helped me to become more comfortable in my own skin and doesn't let me feel ashamed for getting stuff out of the men's section or for being in menswear versus womenswear," says Bueckers, the WNBA's No. 1 draft pick this year. "She's embraced that and helped me find the perfect balance."

Stylists stress that their role is much more than simply shopping and selecting an outfit. Hampton says she tries to understand an athlete on a deeper level, so she can help convey their background, community or overall story through their attire. It's also about managing the hectic travel schedules of athletes across different leagues—Hampton and her team will prepack multiple looks for a series of games or a road trip, but last-minute changes and sourcing of specific pieces can sometimes create chaos.

"There's all these different elements you have to pull together—the makeup artist, the hair stylist," Hampton says. "We don't just pull a rack of clothes. We're not personal shoppers. We create something, start to finish. It's about making that vision come true." *—Jamie Lisanti*



to be perfectly sized to allow for the large taper that occurs from broad shoulders to a thin waist, or to accommodate extra wide hips or muscular quads. Marchitelli considers every detail, even making sure the pant leg looks good with sneakers—a common request.

Marchitelli learned to measure when he was dissatisfied with the way his own suits fit, converting his own bold style and a popular Instagram account into a business designing ensembles not only for the biggest names in sport, but for some of the most significant moments in their lives as well. He made multiple pieces for Allen's May 31 wedding to actress Hailee Steinfeld. "An ivory suit is my favorite piece of men's formal wear," Marchitelli says of the quarterback's reception attire. "It's just classic."

An elegant and timeless silhouette is what Marchitelli considers his signature sartorial style, but the material? The fabrics are where it gets loud. "It's all about being one-of-one," he says. And when you're working with the world's top athletes, no two looks can be the same.

Take Prescott's collection of suits. It's been nearly a decade since he started working with Marchitelli, but the Dallas quarterback has never repeated a look. That keeps the designer on his toes.

"I can't show up with just anything," Marchitelli says. "I go deep into my bag for the most unique, abstract prints I can find—prints no other clothier can get." —K.C.

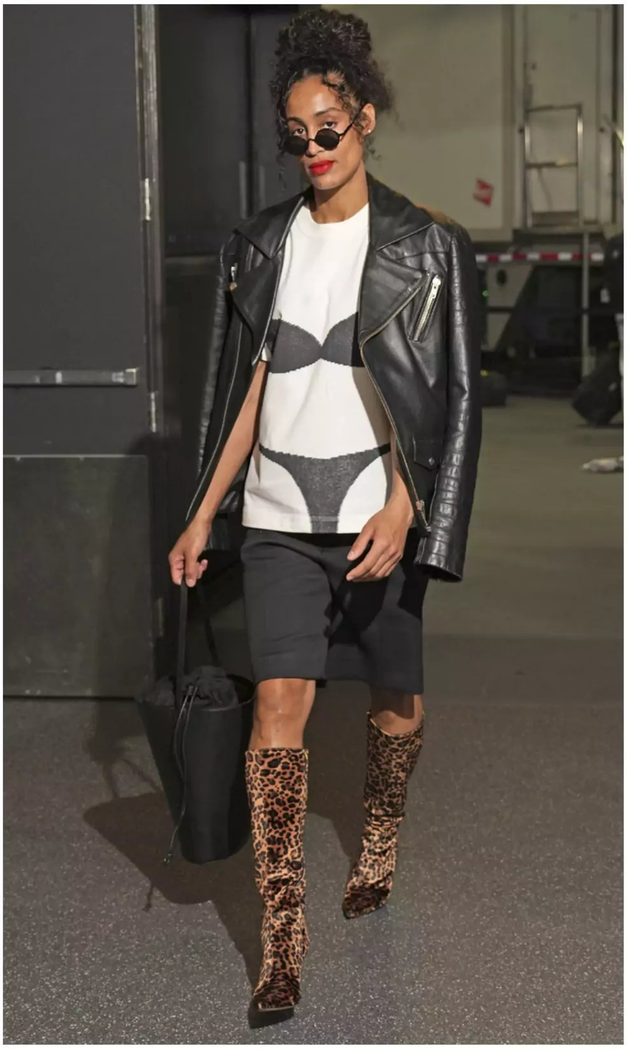
STRUT IT DOWN

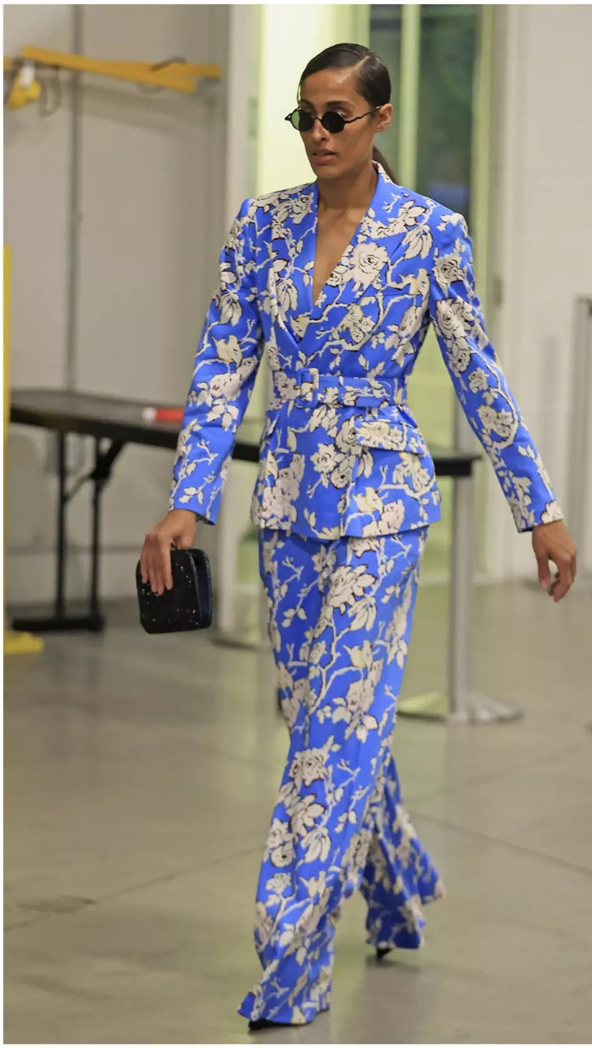
by **Clare Brennan**

The dimly lit corridors in the bowels of arenas do not provide the most glamorous of backdrops, but the WNBA's stars have transformed them into **CUTTING-EDGE CATWALKS***—and in doing so, cemented themselves as style icons*

FROM LEFT: JUAN OCAMPO/NBAE/GETTY IMAGES; KATE FRESE/NBAE/GETTY IMAGES; BARRY GOSSAGE/NBAE/GETTY IMAGES; ADAM HAGY/NBAE/GETTY IMAGES (2)

JESUS IS ART.





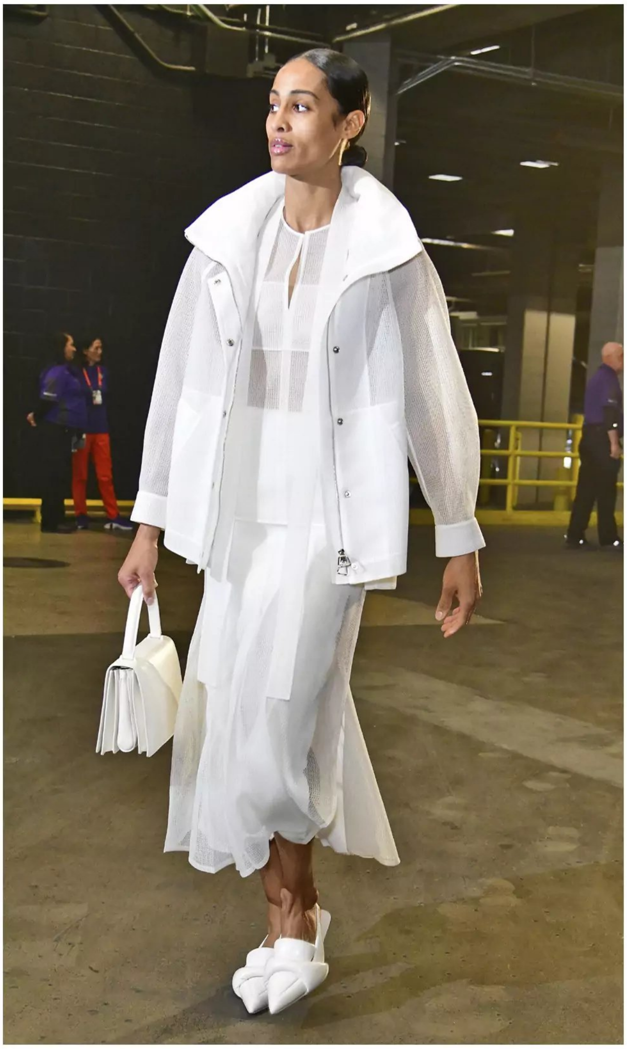
SKYLAR DIGGINS

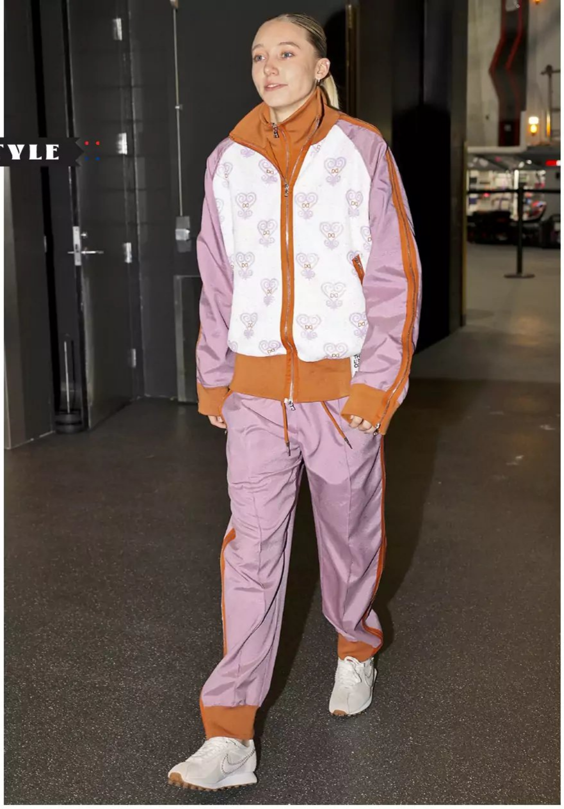
SEATTLE STORM

NOW IN her 11th WNBA season, Skylar Diggins has witnessed a transformation of the league's pregame rituals. "I've been doing tunnel walks since 2013," says Diggins. "[There] just weren't that many people there to take my damn picture." The Storm guard says the W has always been fashion-forward, but more eyeballs have meant more opportunity and influence. "Women's basketball is now an important part of pop culture, whereas before, I don't think we got that recognition," says Diggins, 34. "People take our slang, people take our trends. People are watching what we're wearing."

Diggins takes an intentional approach to her outfits, deploying what she calls "method" or "theme" styling. During her stint with Unrivaled's Lunar Owls earlier this year, she donned looks inspired by the team mascot.

FROM LEFT: JORDAN JOHNSON/NBAE/GETTY IMAGES; SCOTT EKLUND/NBAE/GETTY IMAGES





PAIGE BUECKERS
DALLAS WINGS

Over the past two WNBA seasons, Diggins says she presented a more "business-core" vibe, embellished with metallics and infused with elements of futurism. This year she says she's gravitating toward chic, polished high-fashion pieces.

Living by the mantra, "Look good, feel good, play good," Diggins sees getting dressed as an integral part of her pregame routine, not an ancillary undertaking. She puts on her ensemble just before leaving the house, since she's usually also getting her daughter and son ready to ride with her to the arena. It all comes together right before she hits the tunnel, where Diggins is met by photographers snapping images. But as soon as she enters the locker room, Diggins quickly trades her runway-worthy threads for her dark green Storm uniform.

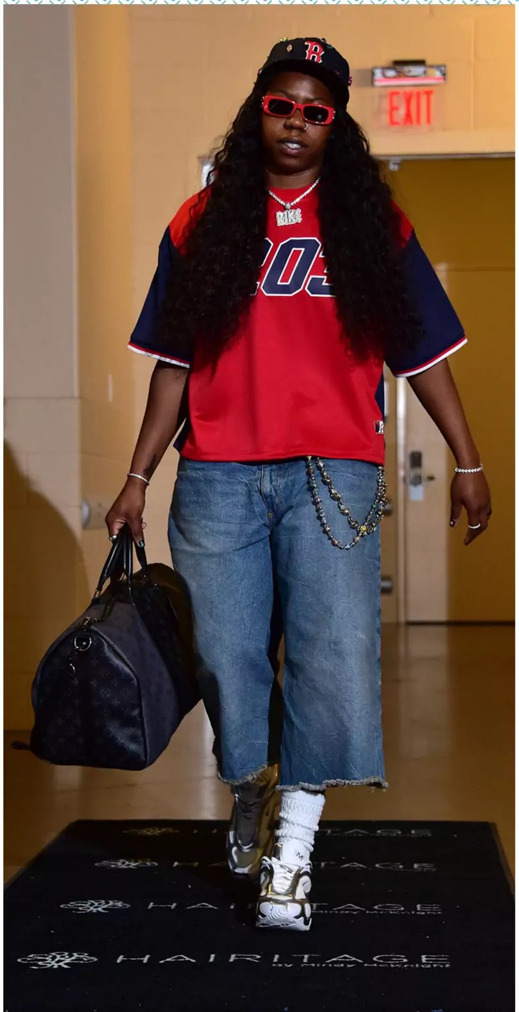
FROM LEFT: BARRY GOSSAGE/NBAE/GETTY IMAGES; ELLEN SCHMIDT/GETTY IMAGES

PAIGE BUECKERS wants to keep the main thing the main thing. As a WNBA rookie, she says that this year she'll be more focused on establishing herself in the league than building her tunnel-fit résumé. But thanks to a prolific career at UConn, Bueckers is no stranger to balancing the many requisites for basketball stardom. The 23-year-old had earned a reputation as something of a style icon even before entering the WNBA. At the draft in April, the league's top pick sparkled in a shimmering three-piece suit, custom-made by Coach and covered in 200,000 glass crystals. She's also garnered a heap of brand deals, including a clever partnership with paint company Sherwin Williams for her first pro game in her home state of Minnesota. She wore a look *(above)* in the brand's color "Radiant Lilac," designed by Harlem fashion icon Dapper Dan. The campaign was not only evidence of Bueckers's status as a figure in fashion, but also the cultural ubiquity—and profitability—of the WNBA tunnel walk.

Confidence, Bueckers says, is the key to a good outfit. She values self-expression and freedom, and she is already known for rocking contrasting pieces. "I find myself to be a mix of masculine and feminine," she says. "I don't want to subject myself to wearing any type of thing or put myself in a box."

ARIKE OGUNBOWALE

DALLAS WINGS

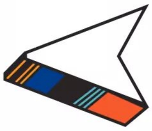


AFTER SEVEN years in the league, Wings guard Arike Ogunbowale has established a blueprint for pregame fits, embodying an effortlessly cool ethos that hasn't gone unnoticed by her peers. Her process follows a similar laid-back vibe—while some players plan outfits weeks in advance, Ogunbowale, 28, typically selects her look on game day. Occasionally, she says, she'll work with stylists for major events, but "80% of the stuff" is Ogunbowale's choosing, which requires her to have a curated closet at the ready. That's the fun part, she says: sourcing pieces from a range of price points and finding smaller, unique brands. She often opts for streetwear-inspired looks, paired with white Nike Air Force 1s. Her ultimate source of style inspiration, though, is her brother, Texans running back Dare Ogunbowale. "Any outfit I wear, I usually run it by him," she says. "We both have a big love for fashion that came from our mom."

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: JUAN OCAMPO/NBAE/GETTY IMAGES; BARRY GOSSAGE/NBAE/GETTY IMAGES; JUAN OCAMPO/NBAE/GETTY IMAGES; MICHAEL GONZALES/NBAE/GETTY IMAGES

CAMERON BRINK

LOS ANGELES SPARKS



CAMERON BRINK entered the WNBA in 2024 with a splash. Despite an ACL injury keeping her off the court, she quickly established herself as a trendsetter. Brink has worked with stylist Mary Gonsalves Kinney since her Stanford days, when she was introduced by family friend Ayesha Curry. Mixing high-end designs with more affordable and approachable pieces has been their priority. “I love a good heel, a miniskirt and a structured jacket,” says Brink. “I love showing off my long legs.” Kinney says there is a potency to Brink’s look: “She can be feminine and sexy and still super powerful.”

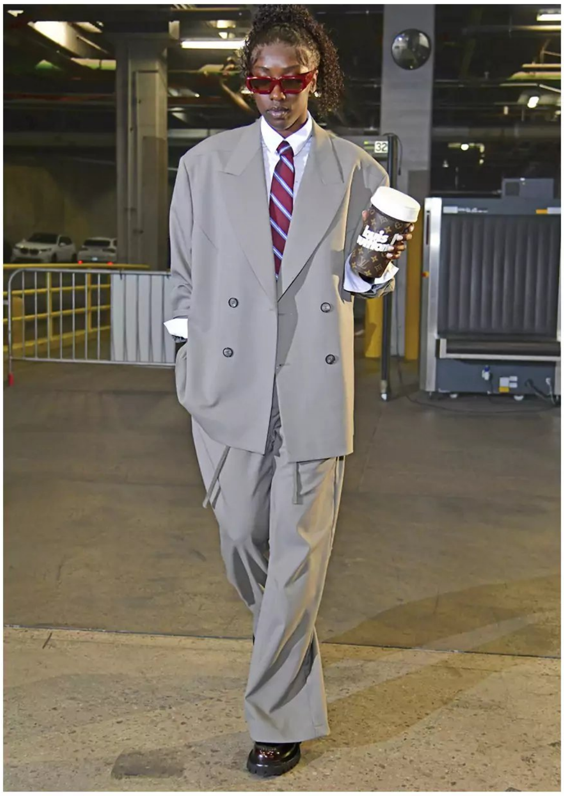
The Sparks forward typically picks her game-day outfit from a rack of pieces Kinney has pulled for her. “If it’s a big game, then I’ll put something extra fancy or spicy on,” says Brink, 23. “But for the most part, it’s about how I’m feeling.” And in a relatable move, in case she’s not in the mood to wear her heels and miniskirt after the game, Brink says she also makes sure to pack a sweatshirt and shorts as a comfortable alternative.

KAHLEAH COPPER

PHOENIX MERCURY

WHAT YOU see is what you get with Kahleah Copper. Her signature on-court explosiveness and flair almost exactly match her off-court style, which she describes as “versatile and playful.” And how can one not appreciate her cheekiness and candor? When outlining how she decides what to wear at each game, Copper is refreshingly honest. “It really depends on where we are. If we go to Connecticut, no shade, I’m not getting dressed [up] in Mohegan Sun [Arena],” says Copper, 30. “I’ll save a favorite [look] for a home game, or New York or L.A.”

The Mercury guard went viral in May for an oversized suit designed by luxury unisex brand Entire Studios, a look *(right)* created in partnership with stylists Marc Desir and VNA Gudino, with whom Copper has worked with for two years. “I tell them to give me the push that I won’t give myself, give me the edge, put me in a pop of color,” she says.



BARRY GOSSAGE/NBAE/GETTY IMAGES

1
Ozzie.
I love him.

JAZZ CHISHOLM JR.
13

MERRILL MADNESS
3

Seager Bombs

READY

STAY LOOSE-N-SEXY
WORLD
TOUR

WHERE'S OSWALDO?

MATILDA
ANDRÉS MUÑOZ
FAST & FURRIEST

MR. SEEDS
Teoscar Hernández
37

TO

JOSH JUNG
6
TEXAS BASEBALL

Chourio

50/50
CLUB

3
"GREAT BASEBALL GAME."
JACKSON MERRILL

KODAI S3NG4
ゴーストフォーク
千賀滉大

YamamOhtani
山本由伸
大谷翔平

TROUT of North America

10
RELEVANT

Chris SALE!
2024
Cy Young
TRIPLE CROWN
Comeback

MATTY O
Hits Dingers
28
MATT OLSON
ATLANTA BASEBALL

BOBBY WITT JR.
7
Bobby BASEBALL

SPORTS & STYLE

by
Stephanie Apstein

WINNERS WIN

WEAR

12
Sean Murphy

While some athletes flaunt designer threads, many MLB players sport something simpler: **CUSTOM T-SHIRTS** *adorned with playful graphics and witty catchphrases*

AARON JUDGE
99
BX
NY
ALL • RISE

COURTESY OF ROTOWEAR (21); COURTESY OF BREAKINGT (7)

FUNKY MUNCY 13

MUSTACHE MAY
CARE FOR YOUR HOMIES

Bedlam at the Bank

SHO YEAAHH!
17

IT HAPPENS ON A *near-weekly basis these days: Something exciting happens on the field at a baseball game. The incident goes viral on social media. The small collection of companies equipped to capitalize on the moment gets to work. The players arrive at the ballpark the next day to find a T-shirt commemorating the episode draped across the backs of their chairs.*

Lakers forward LeBron James has the Met Gala. Patriots wide receiver Stefon Diggs has Milan and Paris Fashion Weeks. Baseball players have the T-shirt Industrial Complex.

The ecosystem is virtually self-sustaining at this point: The companies—the two most popular are BreakingT and Rotowear—mail the shirts to the players, at no cost to them; the players wear the tees on TV, serving as free marketing; fans see them and buy them. Baseball offers 162 batting practice sessions a year, plus several times that many on-camera postgame interviews, which is a lot of chances for T-shirt exposure. Indeed, Rotowear founder Kenny Tevelowitz says he has never run a paid ad. (“Somebody that is more business savvy would look at that and be like, ‘You’re a moron,’ but it’s how I’ve been doing it,” he says with a laugh.) BreakingT and Rotowear—founded in 2014 and ’17, respectively—both have galleries of major leaguers in their T-shirts on their home pages.

The team-wide T-shirt idea itself dates back at least a decade. In 2013, the Blue Jays wore RAISE THE BAR shirts during batting practice to encourage fans to vote reliever Steve Delabar into the All-Star Game. (The campaign worked.) In ’14, Royals pitcher Jeremy Guthrie sported a THESE O’S AIN’T ROYAL T-shirt at his postgame press conference after Kansas City beat Baltimore in Game 3 of the ALCS. (He later apologized, saying a fan had given him the shirt and he was not familiar with the reference to Chris Brown’s hit “Loyal,” which includes the lyric, “These hoes ain’t loyal.”) In ’16, the Cubs donned shirts emblazoned with manager Joe Maddon’s motivational phrase, TRY NOT TO SUCK.

But most of those initiatives were player- or fan-driven; often clubhouse attendants placed the orders at local print shops. Most people date the shirtaissance to Sunday, June 9, 2019, when Max Muncy clobbered a Madison Bumgarner fastball 426 feet into McCovey Cove. “Don’t watch the ball,” the Giants’ ace barked. “Run.” Muncy rolled his eyes. “If you don’t want me to watch,” the Dodgers’ first baseman said, “You can go get it out of the ocean.” By Monday at noon, both BreakingT and Rotowear had T-shirts for sale referencing the moment. A day later, they were on their way to the L.A. clubhouse, where players eagerly

Strong Suit

Cubs vet Justin Turner put teammate Kyle Tucker on display with his playing-card-inspired T-shirt (right), one of hundreds in Rotowear’s collection.

HOME RUN
HERMANOS
THE MAYOR OF THE BATTERY
A.J. MINTER

G FIUME/GETTY IMAGES (TURNER); COURTESY OF ROTOWEAR (4)

K
KYLE TUCKER
HR
30
30
BRUCE⚡BOLT

KANSAS CITY

wore them. Both websites nearly crashed under the weight of all the sales.

“After that, I was like, ‘I’m gonna quit my job and try to do this full-time,’ ” says Tevelowitz, who was formerly an art director at an advertising agency.

The companies decline to share revenue figures, but BreakingT president Jamie Mottram fondly remembers their “Slam Diego” model—a reference to Padres broadcaster Don Orsillo’s call when the team became the first club in history to hit grand slams in four straight games. Shortstop Fernando Tatís Jr. saw the shirt on BreakingT’s website and mentioned to the company that he wanted to wear it on the following night’s *SportsCenter*. There

SKENES
PIT
The LEGEND of
27
JAMES McCANN
SAFETY FIRST

BADER TOTS

JULIO RODRIGUEZ

Flushing
Queens
SOTO
99
ALL RISE
AARON JUDGE

Chest Dressed

Twins center fielder Harrison Bader (far left) and Mariners star Julio Rodríguez have no issue wearing T-shirts bearing their own likenesses.

ALEX ZADOROZNY/MLB PHOTOS/GETTY IMAGES (BADER); MITCHELL LAYTON/GETTY IMAGES (RODRIGUEZ); COURTESY OF BREAKINGT (4); COURTESY OF ROTOWEAR

was just one problem: The shirts didn't actually exist yet. So BreakingT sent the digital file to a local San Diego print shop and had a courier drive it to Petco Park just in time for the ESPN spot. Mottram says the design brought in more than a million dollars in sales.

"It's always hit or miss—in some ways, quite literally," he says. "If a player is not hitting or the team isn't winning, it's not a great look to wear the fun T-shirts."

Not every shirt makes it to batting practice. A few players declined to wear T-shirts taking shots at the Astros' illegal sign-stealing scandal. More often, team leadership bars designs from leaving the clubhouse.

"Profanity," says Guardians field coordinator Kai Correa, a former Giants bench coach. "Hunter Pence made a few that you just can't wear out, like WIN, WIN, WIN, WIN, F--- EVERYTHING ELSE. The guys push the limits with the innuendos. There's always, like, rockets or bananas." (For special orders, by the way, the players do pay.) In 2021, after San Francisco finished in the top three in several defensive metrics, the clubhouse dreamed up a THAT GIANT D T-shirt but was overruled. "[By] some adult in the room," Guardians associate manager and former Giants bullpen coach Craig Albernaz scoffs.

"You work in a sport with a bunch of men, we're gonna come up with some stupid shirts," says Cleveland manager Stephen Vogt.

Sometimes the shirts are such inside jokes that they make no sense even to their designers. In 2023, the Yankees wore Rotowear shirts with a puking emoji and the text I'M SICK ABOUT IT. "I don't know what that was about," says Tevelowitz. Catcher Kyle Higashioka, now with the Rangers, explains that pitcher Jameson Taillon used to say that a lot: "We just started saying it over and over. That was our team saying." Well, they can't all be winners.

> "You work in a sport with a bunch of men," says Cleveland manager Stephen Vogt. "We're gonna come up with **SOME STUPID SHIRTS.**"

Technically, by the way, this is all against the rules. The shirts themselves are fine—the companies are licensed by the players' union, which allows them to use player names and likenesses, but not team logos or even motifs such as pinstripes. The players really aren't supposed to wear them at work, though. MLB's uniform regulations state that "all Players are required to wear only Club-issued apparel, outerwear and equipment while on the field during batting practice and while in any in-stadium interview room up to 30 minutes following games." But the league, presumably occupied with more serious issues, rarely enforces the rule, and most players don't know they are even breaking it.

As for the more informal laws, not everyone agrees, especially when it comes to a tee bearing your own face. The Yankees are divided. "I would never rock my shirt," says left fielder Cody Bellinger. "I think last year I wore my shirt every day," says infielder Jazz Chisholm Jr.

But everyone agrees you're allowed to wear your teammates' shirts—and most of them do. On any given day, the majority of ballplayers head to batting practice in a shirt that appeared at their locker as if by magic. In part, that's laziness: Most of the players interviewed for this story conceded that around 25% of their wardrobe is free T-shirts. Sometimes it's a sense of duty: "I make a point to wear them [in interviews]," says Higashioka. "Just to help them out. It's not like they're sending them to us to wear them in private." Sometimes it's genuine glee at a creative design: When Chicago-based Obvious Shirts debuted FAILED STARTER tees in 2021, most of the Cubs' relievers requested them immediately. But mostly, it's a nod to a season that can feel interminably long.

"Throughout the course of eight months, you have to find little things to celebrate," says Muncy.

Every time you go to a baseball game, the saying goes, you have a chance to see something you've never seen before. And the next day, you just might see it again, on a T-shirt. ☐

Coming off an NBA title, **OKLAHOMA CITY** has a roster that makes it likely that the path to the Finals will go through Bricktown for the foreseeable future

THUNDER

ROAD

by
CHRIS MANNIX

TROPHY LIFE

The deal Presti (far right) made for SGA paid off: He's the 11th player to be regular season and Finals MVP in the same year.

FROM LEFT: GARRETT ELLWOOD/NBAE/GETTY IMAGES; NATHAN J. FISH/THE OKLAHOMAN/USA TODAY NETWORK/IMAGN IMAGES

LAST MONTH, as the confetti fell from the rafters inside Paycom Center, the two men most responsible for Oklahoma City's first NBA title shared a long embrace. Sam Presti, the bespectacled executive hell-bent on building a champion in one of the league's smallest markets. And Shai Gilgeous-Alexander, the young star on whom he bet everything to win it. The road had obstacles: double-digit losing streaks, 20-ish win seasons, talking heads screaming for Presti to deal away Gilgeous-Alexander. They battled from 22 wins their second year together to 68 this season, from the lottery to a championship. As the celebration around them picked up steam, the two hugged and acknowledged the journey. "We both just said, 'We made it to the mountaintop,'" says SGA. "We earned it."

It has been nearly a decade since Presti stared down uncertainty, back when Kevin Durant defected to Golden State, leaving Oklahoma City to face a dark future. He tried to win with Russell Westbrook (didn't work), then with Westbrook *and* Paul George (ditto) before tearing the Thunder roster down to the jerseys in 2019. Seven years after cobbling together one of the NBA's most improbable Finals teams (one that lost to the Big Three Heat in five games), Presti faced the daunting task of trying to do it all over again.

In his first three years as GM, Presti drafted Durant, Westbrook and James Harden, who became the cornerstones of Oklahoma City's failed dynasty. In the four years after it officially crumbled, Presti acquired Gilgeous-Alexander and drafted Chet Holmgren and Jalen Williams, the trio that has formed the foundation of this one. In all, nine of the 14 players on the Thunder's Finals roster began their careers in Oklahoma City. The team developed, slowly, patiently, adding pieces that fit the vision (Alex Caruso, Isaiah Hartenstein), subtracting those (Josh Giddey, Darius Bazley) that didn't.

What came from it, says coach Mark Daigneault, is "an uncommon team," deeply talented, deeply connected and, not surprisingly, overwhelmingly successful. Only two teams—the 2015–16 Warriors and 1995–96 Bulls—have finished a season with more total wins than the Thunder. Those teams defined those eras. Oklahoma City hopes it can define this one.

The NBA has achieved unprecedented parity. For the seventh consecutive season, the league crowned a new champion. No team has played in back-to-back Finals during that stretch. Winners have been from big markets (Golden State, Boston) and small (Milwaukee, Denver), with stars from Serbia (Nikola Jokić), Greece (Giannis Antetokounmpo) and Canada (Gilgeous-Alexander). Former NBA commissioner David Stern once snickered that his job was to shuttle between Boston and Los Angeles to hand out trophies. Adam Silver is spending most of his Junes in middle America.

Stern, who died in 2020, would have loved it. In 2011, determined to whittle down the players' share of basketball-related income and put in a more restrictive salary cap, Stern locked the players out, forcing a 161-day work stoppage. The NBA, Stern said at the time, needed a structure that "30 teams, if well-managed, have an opportunity both to compete and to make a profit." The league lost 240 games from the '11–12 season. It gained a collective bargaining agreement that put it on a path to parity. After 14 years, two more CBAs, a commissioner change (Silver, a longtime deputy commissioner, succeeded Stern in 2014) and a cap spike, it has reached the end of it.

"The goal is that market size essentially becomes irrelevant," says Silver. "The goal isn't necessarily to have a different champion every year. It's to have parity of opportunity." Who wins the title, Silver insisted before the Finals, is irrelevant. "Whichever team were to win, if they were to repeat, I wouldn't then be saying, 'This, therefore, isn't working because I didn't go to a different city to hand out the trophy,' " says Silver. "I'd be saying, 'That's the system we wanted to create, as long as there's a level playing field.' "

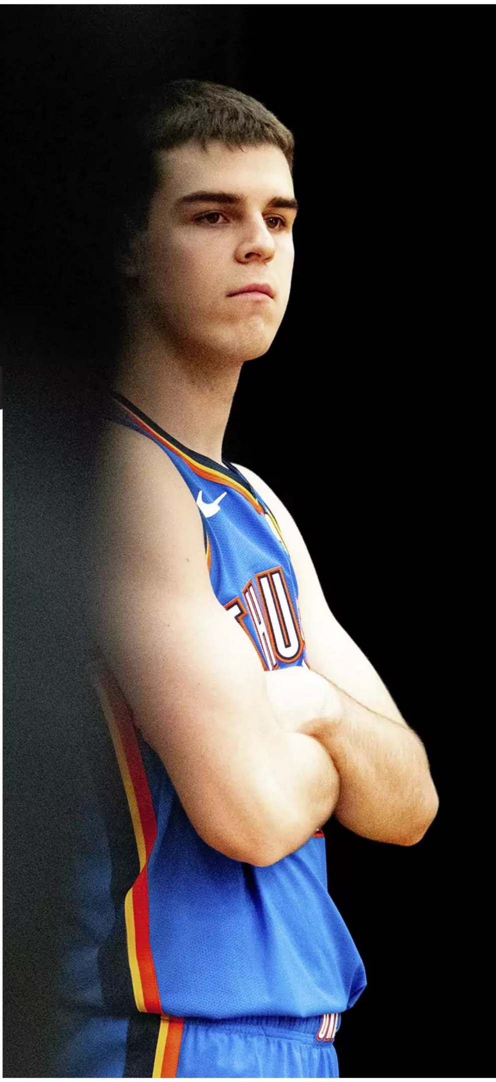
Good, because Silver may be spending a *lot* more time in Bricktown. Gilgeous-Alexander, the reigning MVP, is 27. Williams is 24 and coming off his first All-NBA season. Holmgren is 23. Organic improvement alone should make the Thunder better than the team that went 16–7 in the playoffs. "That's the fun part of this," says Gilgeous-Alexander. "So many of us can still get better. There's not very many of us on the team that are in our prime or even close to it."

Skeptics will claim it's a recycled narrative. Milwaukee, led by the then 26-year-old Antetokounmpo, was supposed to go on a run after winning the 2021 Finals. The Bucks have made three consecutive first-round exits. Denver have a three-time MVP and a cast of 20-somethings around him. They haven't been back to the conference finals. Before Jayson Tatum's playoff Achilles injury, Boston had a roster ready to rip off multiple championships. Now, he's likely to miss most of next season, and the Celtics are expected to shed salary and reboot.

In short: Nothing is certain. But Oklahoma City appears uniquely equipped to succeed. In Milwaukee, the Bucks wheeled and dealed to acquire championship-level talent around Antetokounmpo, surrendering loads of draft capital (including two first-rounders and two swaps to acquire Jrue Holiday in 2020) to do it. That left Milwaukee limited in its ability to refresh its roster with younger—and cheaper—talent.

By contrast, Oklahoma City has added picks as it has built its team out. The Clippers attached five first-rounders and the rights to swap two more to Gilgeous-Alexander in 2019. Overall, the Thunder have seven first-round picks in the next four drafts. It's an enviable amount of capital for a rebuilding team. For a defending champion, it's astonishing. "They can basically replenish every offseason," says Bobby Marks, a former Nets executive.

"They have the **ULTIMATE FLEXIBILITY**," says Marks. "If a player gets too pricey, they have cheaper options there to replace them."



Denver has been able to add young players around Jokić but as it has peeled off pricey veterans over the last few years (Bruce Brown, Kentavious Caldwell-Pope), its younger talent (Peyton Watson, Julian Strawther) has not been able to replace them. That's killed the Nuggets on the margins. Denver has ranked in the bottom third in bench scoring in each of the last two seasons. Not coincidentally, they have been eliminated in seven games in the conference semifinals both years.

The Thunder, meanwhile, were the youngest team in the NBA at the start of the season and are the second youngest to win a title. All season OKC tried to live in the moment. After it, it was difficult not to ponder what's possible. "I'm excited for the future of this team," said Gilgeous-Alexander. "This is a great start."

DEEP THOUGHTS

When he's healthy, Topić (left) will join Dort and Wallace (bottom) in a young Thunder rotation that is brimming with enough talent to adequately complement the team's superstar contingent.

CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: DYLAN GOODMAN/NBAE/GETTY IMAGES; BRANDON TODD/NBAE/GETTY IMAGES; ZACH BEEKER/NBAE/GETTY IMAGES

MARK DAIGNEAULT looked bemused. Two hours before a critical Game 5, a reporter—*possibly* this one—asked him at his pregame media availability for a scouting report on Nikola Topić, the 2024 lottery pick who has been out all season with a knee injury. A few minutes later, Daigneault crossed paths with the same reporter in the hallway. "What do you want to talk about after the game?" asked Daigneault. "The draft?"

Perhaps. Awkward timing aside, it's fun to consider Oklahoma City's potential. Take Topić. The slender, 6'6" guard was a top player in Europe in the 2023–24 season and a projected top-10 pick. A torn ACL ended Topić's season a month before the draft, causing him to slide to No. 12, where the Thunder, with little need for a playable rookie, scooped him up. In limited practice time, Topić has impressed. "He's a modern NBA point guard," says Thunder forward Kenrich Williams. "He plays like a 30-year-old vet." Internally everyone—including Daigneault—is eager to see if Topić can crack Oklahoma City's rotation.

"He's exciting when you watch him on film," says Daigneault. "He's an old soul. He's way beyond his years, so that bodes really well for him, regardless of where he starts as a player on the court. That stuff translates, and he's been very impressive with that."

Holmgren's career has been plagued by injuries, leading the Thunder to believe the stringy 7'1" forward is just scratching the surface of his potential. A nasty hip injury cost Holmgren 50 games in 2024–25, robbing him of the strength and conditioning he needed to be at his best. Holmgren shot 43.3% from three in the first quarter this season, when his legs were fresh. In the fourth, that number dipped to 25%.

Oklahoma City will prioritize conditioning with Holmgren this summer. His trainer, Drew Hanlen, has already mapped out a plan to improve his ability to score through contact and become a more versatile three-point shooter. Asked what level he expected Holmgren to rise to next season, Hanlen was succinct: "All-Star."

It isn't just Holmgren. In his third season, Williams gave off some Scottie Pippen vibes, emerging as an elite scorer, playmaker and defender. Cason Wallace, 21, is a defensive stopper with a rapidly developing three-point shot. Aaron Wiggins, Jaylin Williams and Isaiah Joe—none of whom is older than 26—played supporting roles this year but have shown flashes of being ready for more.

That's an enormous advantage, says Marks. Most title contenders have had to "play the minimum game," scouring the market for bargain-basement free agents to flesh out a roster top heavy with expensive talent. "When you do that," says Marks, "everything has to go perfectly." The Thunder, with its deep bench of young players and stockpile of picks, don't have to. "They have the ultimate flexibility," says Marks. "If a player gets too pricey, they have cheaper options there to replace them."

In 2012, Presti, fearful of potential luxury tax penalties, balked at offering Harden a four-year, $60 million contract extension, flipped him to Houston and ended the Big Three era before it could really get started. Presti learned from that mistake. The Thunder roster will get expensive—Gilgeous-Alexander is in the middle of a five-year, $172 million contract while Holmgren and Williams are eligible to sign max deals this summer—but it has some built-in flexibility. Several key role players have team options (Hartenstein, Luguentz Dort, Kenrich Williams in 2026, Joe in '27) that will help the Thunder stay under the second tax apron and avoid the restrictions that come with it.

A decade after one super team disbanded, another has risen in Oklahoma City, one with a runway even longer than the first. After Game 7, the Thunder locker room was strangely quiet. Players held corked champagne bottles, too young to understand how to open them. A tutorial from Caruso, a member of the Lakers' 2020 title team, didn't stick. "We'll get some rest, reset, try to go again next year and see if we can do it again," cracked Caruso. Even in celebrations, the Thunder are always trying to get better. □

MAKE YOUR

Unbound by NCAA regulations, college athletes such as AJ Storr treat the **TRANSFER PORTAL** like free agency—in search of money and playing time. But is that always what's best for them long-term?

by **PAT FORDE**

special reporting by
DAN FALKENHEIM

PHOTO ILLUSTRATION BY
SI PREMEDIA

JK
ST. JO
WISC
K

MOVE

KA
Ole Miss
2

A

A POPULAR mantra of recent years is to “Be where your feet are.” AJ Storr is good at that, even if his feet don’t stay still for very long.

“I live in the moment,” Storr says. “I just try to enjoy where I am. It doesn’t seem like I’ve moved this many times.”

Storr is a college basketball player. He is 21 years old and has attended eight different schools in eight different states since 2020, when he was still in high school, hopscotching across the map to chase an NBA dream. He is one of the faces of a Migration Generation of young athletes, navigating an impermanence unlike anything previously seen at the preprofessional levels. Have game, will travel.

The Migration Generation is unbound by NCAA transfer regulations and free to move about the country annually in pursuit of playing time and NIL cash. From 2019–20 through ’23–24, when NCAA transfer limitations were struck down by the courts, Division I portal entrants nearly doubled, from 13,689 to 24,399. Football portal entries rose 138% in that span, while women’s basketball increased 132% and men’s hoops elevated 111%. Final figures are not in for ’24–25, but the expectation is for another significant year-over-year increase in D-I transfers.

The standard line from college sports leaders for years was that athletes transfer less frequently than the general college student population. According to a 2025 study from the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, transfers represented 13.1% of all continuing and returning undergraduates. In men’s and women’s basketball, that percentage has been surpassed.

Yet even before reaching college, many athletes are part of a culture that encourages player movement. Transfers have become routine at the high school level as well, particularly among elite prospects looking to maximize their college options—and in some states to take advantage of the NIL opportunities now available. Six of the top seven men’s basketball prospects in the 247 Sports rankings for the class of 2025 transferred at least once in high school, and three of them transferred three or more times. While the majority of top-50 football prospects attended just one high school (per 247 Sports), in boys’ basketball the number who have transferred at least once before heading off to college is 50%. Football and especially

THIS PAGE: ERICK W. RASCO; PREVIOUS PAGE: ERICK W. RASCO (BODY, OLE MISS UNIFORM); MITCHELL LAYTON/GETTY IMAGES (ST. JOHN’S UNIFORM); MICHAEL HICKEY/GETTY IMAGES (WISCONSIN UNIFORM); JAY BIGGERSTAFF/IMAGN IMAGES (KANSAS UNIFORM)

FANTASTIC FOURTH

From St. John's to Wisconsin to Kansas and now to Ole Miss, Storr has managed to stay at a power-conference school with each transfer, a feat many other portal hoppers can't claim.

KANSAS
2
DUKE
9
WISCONSIN
2
COMPEER
#CHAMPIONSHIP
1
12
ST JOHN'S
2
XAVIER
2

FROM LEFT: LANCE KING/GETTY IMAGES; MARK HOFFMAN/MILWAUKEE JOURNAL SENTINEL/ USA TODAY NETWORK/IMAGN IMAGES; JUSTIN CASTERLINE/GETTY IMAGES

basketball players increasingly are itinerant workers.

Within this transient ecosystem, there are rational explanations for many of the stops on Storr's journey from home in Kankakee, Ill., to Las Vegas to Chandler, Ariz., to Bradenton, Fla., to Queens, N.Y., to Madison, Wis., to Lawrence, Kan., to his present location, Oxford, Miss. The COVID-19 pandemic shut down basketball seasons at both Kankakee High and his next stop, athletic powerhouse Bishop Gorman, in Vegas, where his dad lives. Storr graduated from Compass Prep in Arizona after playing for a stacked team there in 2020–21, but he was only 17 so he took a postgrad year at another prep power, Florida's IMG Academy.

His first college stop was at St. John's. Coach Mike Anderson was fired after Storr's freshman season, so Storr returned to his Midwestern roots with Wisconsin. The 6'7" wing led a 22-win NCAA tournament team with 16.8 points per game, then made a decision that ended badly: He left for blueblood Kansas. Whatever Storr might have gained in NIL money, he lost as a basketball player. His playing time and productivity plummeted as the Jayhawks struggled through their worst season since 1988–89.

Which is why Storr is now at Ole Miss, relocating to the Deep South for the first time after touching all the other major geographic areas of the United States. "It's a unique town," Storr says. "It's literally a college town—that's all there is. But I like it. I'm just trying to lock in."

Storr's latest—and presumably last—college coach does not want the player to be seen as a cautionary tale, pointing out the reasons for his transfers. "AJ's story is one of the most misunderstood stories ever," says Chris Beard. "I'll do my part, making sure everybody understands the truth. Maybe just the one transfer from Wisconsin to Kansas [was questionable], but none of us can live our lives knowing everything. And it's Kansas. So with AJ specifically, [I have] no concern, because I think he's hungry for just a home and an opportunity to thrive."

Storr has managed to do something many other members of the Migration Generation have not—remain at the power-conference level with every move. A 2024 study by AD Advisors and Timark Partners concluded that 65% of D-I basketball portal entrants moved down at least one competitive level or did not find a new home.

The conclusion from a white paper on the subject, by former Auburn athletic director Jay Jacobs and Mark LaBarbera of Timark Partners, states: "The data in this study reinforces a clear reality: the vast majority of NCAA Division I men's basketball players who enter the transfer portal move down or out. The portal isn't the place to rise, but it is the place to find more playing time, albeit at a lower level."

This isn't just a basketball phenomenon, though. It is a football reality as well. AD Advisors found that 60% of FBS transfers move down a level as well. For every Jared Verse, who went from FCS Albany to Florida State to the first round of the NFL draft, there is more than one Jaden Rashada, whose path has gone from commitments to Miami and Florida to suiting up at Arizona State and Georgia to his current home, FCS Sacramento State (after having attended three high schools).

"I think the issue that we miss is the number of young people lost to the system because of the transfer freedom," says SEC commissioner Greg Sankey. "We can all report stories of, 'Wow, wasn't it great that somebody went from Point A to Point B and it worked?' But there's attrition, and there's academic attrition—lost credits that our young people talk to us about. And then there's loss of connection, loss of opportunity.

"So it's not all a bed of roses. There's a lot of people in the ears of young people telling them it's going to be better. That's not data-driven. I think one of the underreported realities is really aggregating not only the data but the stories about young people who said, 'Well, the grass is going to be greener,' and that wasn't the case. Or promises or representations that went unfulfilled."

As Sankey notes, an axiomatic by-product of increased player movement is decreased academic progress. College sports has admirably improved its graduation rates over the last three decades, but the wide-open transfer market will inevitably lead to a statistical downturn.

The tension inherent in the current landscape stems from restraint of trade arguments vs. the educational underpinning of college sports. The NCAA has ceded ground over the years, from its longtime stance that transfers in football and basketball had to sit out a season, to a one-time free transfer rule, to the current reality of constant free agency. That was forced upon the association in December 2023, when seven state attorneys general sued for athletes to have a virtually unrestricted transfer marketplace in pursuit of NIL opportunities.

But what's theoretically good for business opportunities isn't suited for academic success—which, once upon a time, was of primary concern (or at least a primary talking point). The latest academic progress rate and graduation success rate statistics from the NCAA continue to paint a positive picture, but the data for that report in November 2024 covers a six-year window that closed on Aug. 31, 2023—a few months before all transfer regulations were effectively tossed out. So the largest fundamental changes have yet to be factored in.

Sources at the national and campus levels in college athletics who have access to some more recent academic data for transfers say a single change of schools usually slows progress toward a degree. Additional changes compound the slowdown, as difficulties transferring class credits multiply. "A second or third transfer can only exacerbate the situation," one source says. "It can't make things better."

Storr says a second transfer meant changing his major from communications at Wisconsin to liberal arts at Kansas. Now he's "still figuring out" what his major will be at Ole Miss. He's hoping to graduate in the spring of 2026.

Villanova guard Devin Askew, who is embarking upon his sixth college season at five different schools, received his undergraduate degree in interdisciplinary studies at his third stop, Cal. He studied consumer affairs in 2024–25 at Long Beach State but is vague about his course of postgrad studies at Villanova. "I'm in a certificate program in, uh, I want to say communications?" says Askew.

ASKEW CAREER

The peripatetic Nova forward, who's entering his sixth season at his fifth school, is coming off his best year on the court, averaging 18.9 ppg at Long Beach State.

> *"I think the issue that we miss is the number of young people* ***LOST TO THE SYSTEM*** *because of the transfer freedom," Sankey says. "There's loss of connection, loss of opportunity."*

Speeding down the no-limits autobahn to more revenue, college sports remain tethered to higher education, which sometimes seems like an inconvenient add-on that interferes with aerodynamics. But many athletes, their parents and anyone else in their ear might well be steering along an unrealistic career path long before college.

This spring Project Play, an initiative from the Aspen Institute's Sports & Society Program, released findings from a survey of youth-sports parents, showing that 22% believe their children will compete in college sports and 11% believe their children will compete professionally and/or at the Olympic level. The reality is that a tiny fraction of those kids will advance that far athletically, but that belief can help fuel a huge investment of time, money and emotion on youth sports.

"There's nothing wrong with dreaming, right?" says Jon Solomon of Project Play. "But what happens when reality sets in? Especially when there's this idea of wanting a return on investment over the years? The vast majority of high school athletes aren't going to reach the next level."

Sometimes, the response to a lack of success is neither to accept a lesser role at a current school nor to refocus on a different activity. It's to change schools, change coaches, find some other reason why little Johnny isn't the starting quarterback or little Janie isn't the starting point guard.

VILLANOVA ATHLETICS

For high-level prospects in football and basketball, a move doesn't necessarily mean going to a neighboring school. It means uprooting to attend one of the major prep schools or athletic academies that dot the landscape. In previous decades, boarding schools like Oak Hill Academy in Virginia and a handful in the Northeast were talent magnets. Now it's the likes of IMG and Montverde in Florida; Link Academy in Branson, Mo.; Sunrise Christian in Bel Aire, Kan.; Wasatch Academy in Utah; and Prolific Prep in Napa, Calif. (which is relocating to Florida).

Here's the problem: School connectedness, defined as the "belief by students that adults and peers in the school care about their learning as well as about them as persons," was associated with lower prevalence of every risk behavior and experience examined in a 2021 study conducted by the CDC. While data specifically addressing the high school athlete transfer situation is sparse, it stands to reason that a school change could endanger an athlete's sense of belonging every bit as much as a student in the general population.

Research indicates that may be the case at the college level. In a 2020 paper titled "College Athletes and the Influence of Academic and Athletic Investment on Sense of Belonging," researchers from VCU and Cincinnati found transfer athletes "feel a lower sense of belonging on campus than non-transfer student-athletes." Transferring isn't a simple process, either: A survey published by Public Agenda in February found that more than half of respondents who have tried to transfer credits reported some degree of credit loss.

Multiple transfers can also disconnect athletes from other advantages to be gained from putting down roots on a college campus such as a friend group built on relationships developed over time and a familiar support network. NCAA literature on mental-health best practices stresses the need for professionals to "foster trust with athletes," which can be difficult if they are moving from school to school.

"Sooner or later in life, you're going to need your buddies," says Michigan State men's basketball coach Tom Izzo. "You're going to need your friends. I am worried about mental health. I'm worried about what these [transferring] players are going to do in a year or two. If I'm wrong, that's a good thing. But if I'm right, that's sad."

At many of the bigger athletic programs with successful teams, loyal alums are willing to extend job opportunities to former athletes—not necessarily stars, but those who put in four years at their shared alma mater.

"You're going to be a former player for 50 years, don't be a fool," Purdue men's basketball coach Matt Painter said at the 2024 Final Four. "Understand that your education from Purdue will take you a long way. But also the contacts that you will make and how you treat people will take you a long way.

"If you change [schools] three or four times, you don't get your degree, don't become a pro, don't have any contacts, you didn't take that opportunity and get any better, then what are we doing for young people?"

For all their movement, both Askew and Storr say they wouldn't change their paths. Askew entered college young, reclassifying in high school and skipping his senior year to enroll at Kentucky amid the tumult of COVID-19—a time when in-person recruiting was difficult, and many initial prospect evaluations were misguided. He was thrust into a starting role on John Calipari's worst team and was overwhelmed, then spent a year at Texas before returning to his home state of California. "I've learned something every place I've been," Askew says. "I definitely feel older and wiser."

Storr feels largely the same. He says he doesn't regret any of his transfers—not even from a starring role at Wisconsin to being the target of fan criticism as a well-paid backup at Kansas. What looked like a one-season springboard to the NBA instead led to a fourth stop in college. Like many other members of the Migration Generation, big dreams have been deferred as the search for the right fit goes on.

"I've learned from every step I've made," he says. "Everyone has something to say about it, but it's cool. It's totally fine with me."

Asked what his best move has been so far, Storr laughs and says, "To be continued." ☐

I’LL STICK AROUND

Power programs often lure up-and-comers in the mid-majors with NIL offers and greater exposure, but Illinois State’s stars bucked this nomadic norm

Chase Walker asked to meet with his coach at Illinois State, Ryan Pedon, in March. The Redbirds were about to start play in the CBI tournament, a reward for their first winning season since 2018–19. Walker requested that Pedon’s wife, Stephanie, be present, and Walker’s parents joined via Zoom.

Pedon knew what this was about. Walker, a first-team All-Missouri Valley Conference big man as a sophomore, was weighing transfer options. Power-conference schools had been trying to lure him away for months with offers of larger NIL compensation and greater exposure than he could get at a mid-major.

“As coaches, we’re all aware what is going on underneath the surface throughout the second half of the season—at least,” says Pedon. “There are players who already know what they’re going to make next year at their next school.”

In a reversal of the nomadic norm in college basketball’s free-transfer era, Walker called the meeting to tell everyone he was staying put. The gathering ended in tears of joy from Stephanie Pedon and Walker’s parents.

“People asked why I would stay,” Walker says. “I flipped it to, *Why would I leave?* We’re building something here. I don’t need all that money right now. Give me a basketball gym and a place to stay with a PlayStation, and it’s all good.”

That was just the beginning of Illinois State’s trend-busting spring, when a whopping seven of Walker’s teammates chose to stay with him. That included his two roommates, guard Johnny Kinziger and wing Ty Pence. The trio, who came in together in 2023, had all received transfer offers from higher-profile schools.

“We just sat down and were real with each other,” Kinziger says. “We’re all really happy where we are, and we want to be part of something special together.”

The 6'9" Walker weighed nearly 400 pounds at one point in high school, his talent buried beneath excess weight. The top programs weren’t interested in him, and neither were most of those a rung below. While dropping pounds and remaking his body, Walker’s college choice came down to Toledo, Liberty and Illinois State. Pedon plotted a redshirt year to allow Walker more time to get in college basketball shape.

Injuries changed those plans 15 games into Walker’s freshman season in 2023–24. Playing at around 300 pounds, Walker flashed his potential, then kept slimming down to his playing weight of 270 for his sophomore season. He leveled up, averaging 15.2 points and 6.2 rebounds in just 24.3 minutes per game, then upped his scoring to 20 points per game in the Redbirds’ run to the CBI title.

“He is ridiculously strong,” Pedon says. “He’s a football helmet away from the NFL.”

Hence the high-major tampering. Power programs that had no interest in Walker two years earlier were now waving money in his face.

In the Valley, a proud conference that saw teams win games in nine of the last 13 NCAA tournaments, this has become a bitter rite of spring. High-major programs come poaching the league’s

ILLINOIS STATE ATHLETICS

DON'T WALK AWAY

Walker (left) and Kinziger had little interest from power schools as recruits, but that changed after impressive sophomore seasons.

top players and coaches—sometimes as package deals. This year, Iowa hired Drake's first-year coach Ben McCollum and got his star point guard, Bennett Stirtz, as well. Last year, Drake lost coach Darian DeVries and his standout son, Tucker, to West Virginia (and both now at Indiana). Indiana State's 2024 team, an NIT finalist that won 32 games, lost coach Josh Schertz, guard Isaiah Swope and big man Robbie Avila to Saint Louis; guard Julian Larry and forward Jayson Kent to Texas; and guard Ryan Conwell to Xavier.

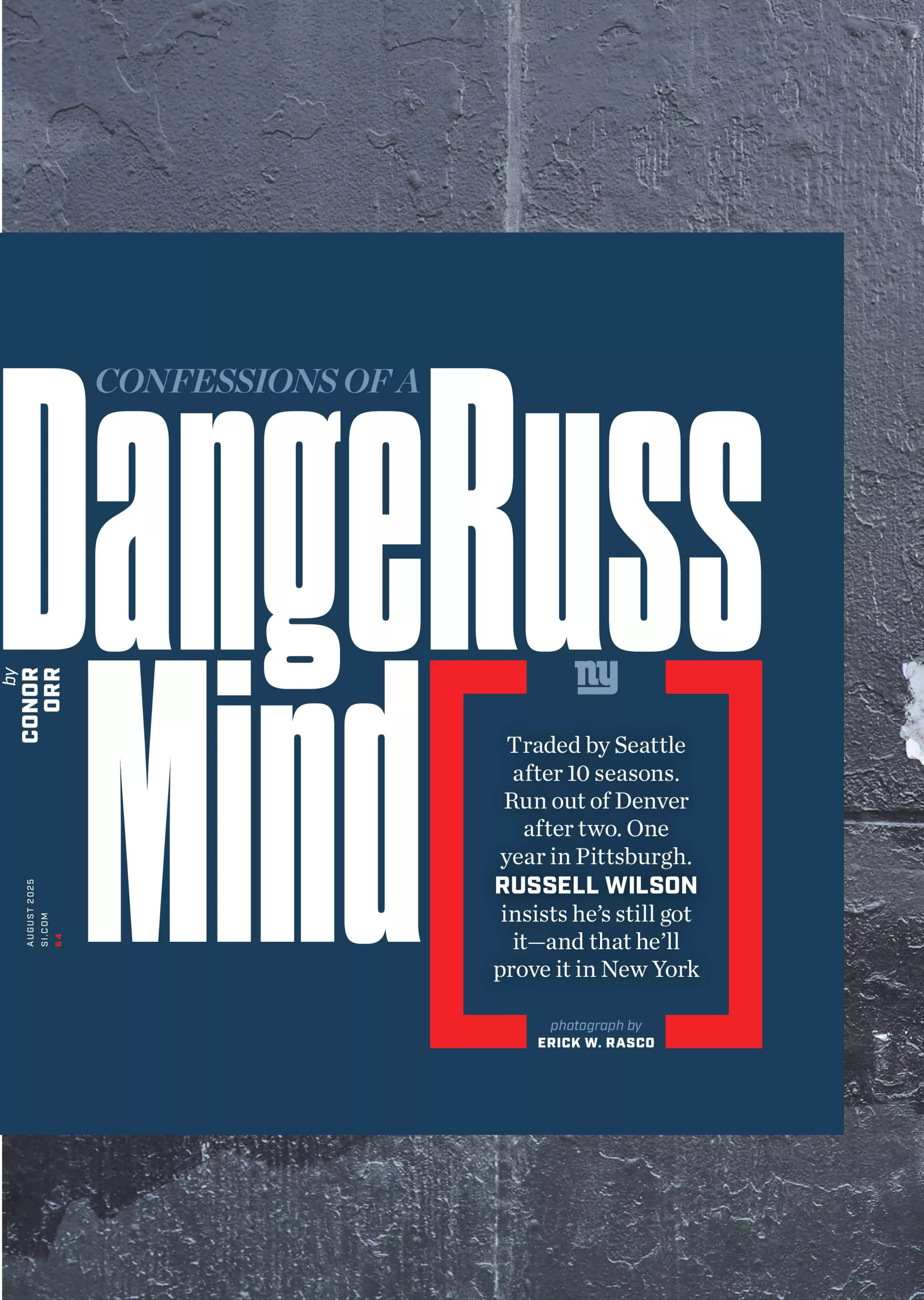
"We're as vulnerable as any league in the country," Pedon says.

The Valley named 16 players to its three all-conference teams this year, and five of the eight with remaining eligibility entered the transfer portal. The three who didn't: Trey Campbell of Northern Iowa and two Redbirds, Walker and Kinziger.

Like Walker, Kinziger was overlooked in recruiting by the Midwest's high-major schools. He chose Illinois State over Green Bay, moved into the starting lineup late in his freshman season and led the team in minutes played last year while averaging 14.6 points per game. Kinziger weighed transfer options with his family this spring, but he finalized his decision to stay put while playing a round of golf with Redbirds assistant coach Andrew Dakich. They drove from the course to Pedon's house to give him the news.

"Johnny was the last one," Walker says. "When I heard he was staying, I was smiling ear-to-ear for a week and a half."

After surviving Portal Poaching Season, fully stocked Illinois State is setting its sights on a MVC title run and its first NCAA tournament bid since 1998. "They understand that there is value in legacy and their longevity at a place," Pedon says. "Something that's not talked about enough in this is what's best for the kids in the long run. Where are they going to go to homecoming when they're 40? What letter jacket are they going to wear? If you're always moving around, where do you belong?" —P.F.



CONFESSIONS OF A DangeRuss Mind

by **CONOR ORR**

Traded by Seattle after 10 seasons. Run out of Denver after two. One year in Pittsburgh. **RUSSELL WILSON** insists he's still got it—and that he'll prove it in New York

photograph by
ERICK W. RASCO

SLEEPING GIANT

The 10-time Pro Bowler's new home will give him a chance to show his detractors that he hasn't lost his magic touch.

Here we go. Just 35 minutes in and there are cell phones in the air, stretching over the promenade like an oak forest. And it's not just the three kids from a nearby high school who saw Russell Wilson over by the park, received autographs, played catch with him and got an inspirational pep talk after sharing their career goals. It's mostly people one would assume were indifferent to this kind of thing. Stylish city people. Septuagenarians in pastel-colored pants. Couples who look like they would care more about when the new LCD Soundsystem album is dropping than about a guy who might only be a temporary solution at quarterback for the New York Giants.

NEW YORK STATE OF MIND

Thanks to his one-year, $10.5 million contract, Wilson's tenure with the Giants isn't guaranteed to last long, but that hasn't stopped him from forging a bond with fans (opposite).

FROM LEFT: DAN MULLAN/GETTY IMAGES; ERICK W. RASCO [2]

Of course, Wilson doesn't see it that way—*temporary.* He *never* sees it that way. He certainly doesn't carry himself that way. And really, this is difficult news for someone like me, who was debating whether I should continue to pay tithes to the Church of Russell Wilson. I was wondering if, after all this time, he had, in fact, become the player that your favorite NFL analyst, part-time social media comedian, anonymous league source or fantasy football tape dog has proclaimed to be past his prime. Like any believer questioning his faith, I had gone through an arc, one that began with astonishment (at peak-of-his-powers Wilson performing backfield evasions that looked more like something you'd see from a circus performer than a football player), followed by unquestioned adoration, then acclimation and, ultimately and inevitably, a bit of disillusionment.

But seeing Wilson here in this element—seeing him at a Knicks playoff game, seeing him now in this very moment surrounded by beaming officers from the NYPD after the kids have cleared out, seeing him hanging with Carmelo Anthony, seeing him in the suite at Yankee Stadium and with Aaron Judge next to the batting cages—one cannot help but tumble into the reality that Wilson has so effectively created for more than a decade. A world where anything is possible. And, really, a world where most of it comes true if we're being honest. The guy is a Super Bowl champion dual-sport athlete who has has played for both the Yankees (albeit only in a spring training game) and the Giants and is married to Ciara, a quadruple-platinum pop star.

Now, his latest chapter begins with a magical kind of symmetry—the Giants handing Wilson the same locker in MetLife Stadium that he used at Super Bowl XLVIII as a member of the Seahawks. It's a world where the past three seasons—during which Wilson has become, to some, more meme than player—are simply part of a larger conversation.

"Honestly, I feel like I'm 25 years old all over again," Wilson says, leaning against a fence backing up to the East River, not far from the Brooklyn Bridge. "And I think part of that is just physically I feel great. Mentally, I feel amazing in terms of, *It's possible*. You know what I mean? And I think ultimately, a big part of it is the people you're around, the players, the coaching staff, the mentality of the guys. And then being in the city. The energy of it is for people that like to be fast-paced, which is me."

Laugh if you'd like at the people—people, dammit, like me—who now can't help but reserve some benefit of the doubt. There's a difference between the Wilson experience on screen and in person. Face-to-face, he has the ability to make it seem like the sun came out because he wanted it to; that a person can will everything from an outfit, a hairdo, a Williams Sonoma catalog–perfect family and, sure, that the latter stages of an NFL career turn out the way he writes it down on paper. (He writes *everything* down on paper.)

And in New York, with a young Giants team searching for an identity, in a place that rewards those sort of lofty manifestations produced by the type of athlete who can ably filter out the noise of the detractors, it's worth wondering if this is where Wilson was meant to end up all along.

"Me and Carmelo were talking about this," Wilson says. "He's like, 'Man, this is the perfect place for you to reestablish and have everybody realize who Russell Wilson really is, by not just how you play on the field, but what you do, the community and different things that you're able to impact.'

"And people, it doesn't get any bigger than New York City."

IN THE PAST three years, Wilson has gone from from a torrid stretch of nine Pro Bowl berths in 10 seasons with Seattle to a 2022 campaign, his first with the Broncos, that saw his completion percentage (60.5%) hit a career low, his sacks (55) hit a league and career high and all the fervor around his arrival in Denver completely vanish. Despite bouncing back in ’23 with a 26-touchdown, eight-interception season, the Broncos ate a historic amount of dead money ($85 million) for the right to start over at the position with 24-year-old rookie Bo Nix.

Wilson signed with Pittsburgh and recovered from injury to retake a starting job last year, but with Aaron Rodgers in the Steelers’ sights, Wilson left to join his fourth team in five years.

Underlying all this was the manner in which the discourse surrounding Wilson—which had previously bordered on hero worship—changed. In reality, Wilson is probably one or two good seasons away from becoming a Hall of Famer. Fans went from universally begging the Seahawks to “let Russ cook” to making a mad dash to their own personal open mic night to chide Wilson for, say, doing high knees on an airplane to aid in his recovery during an international flight, or having his own office while in Denver, or putting his whole heart into an elaborate on-field warmup. Last year, former NFL quarterback Robert Griffin III said in a video posted on social media that he’d never seen a future Hall of Famer become the victim of “slander” as much as Wilson had after leaving Seattle, where an impasse in 2022 led to him being traded to the Broncos for a massive haul of picks and players.

> “Honestly, I feel like I’m 25 years old all over again,” says the 36-year-old Wilson. “Part of that is **PHYSICALLY, I FEEL GREAT.** Mentally, I feel amazing in terms of, It’s possible.”

How would Wilson contextualize all of this? What would he call it?

“It’s called a *career*,” Wilson says. “You look back at somebody’s career over a 20-year period—I would say that 18 or 19 or even 17 of my 20 years, if they’re great years, would you complain? And I think that everything in life happens for a reason.”

If one were to project Wilson’s numbers last year with Pittsburgh to a full season, he was on pace to throw 25 touchdowns and eight interceptions. This, following a finale in Denver in which he threw 26 TDs and eight interceptions.

Drew Brees had four seasons in his career in which he played 16 games and threw for 26 or fewer touchdown passes. Tom Brady had six. Peyton Manning had three. Only seven of Ben Roethlisberger’s 18 seasons were better from a statistical standpoint than Wilson’s 2023 season in Denver, one that was supposedly a harbinger of his demise. (Wilson has four total seasons of scoring a 12 or less on Pro Football Reference’s Approximate Value metric, whereas Roethlisberger only has six *above* that number). A composite of EPA (expected points added per dropback) and completion percentage over expectation has Wilson 13th overall spanning a 14-year period between 2010 and ’24, ahead of Roethlisberger, Matt Ryan, Dak Prescott,

FROM LEFT: DAN MULLAN/GETTY IMAGES; ERICK W. RASCO

MERRY-GO-ROUND

Assuming he's under center in Week 1, Wilson will become the Giants' sixth starting QB since the beginning of the 2023 season.

ON THE MOVE

After leading Seattle to its only NFL title in 2014, Wilson had short stays in Denver, where he went 11–19, and Pittsburgh, where injuries cut short his only season.

Matthew Stafford, Eli Manning and Jalen Hurts. And just a decimal point behind reigning NFL MVP Josh Allen.

Wilson, who turns 37 in November, confirmed that he still believes, as he told me nearly five years ago, that he wants to play into his early 40s. ("Five-plus years," he says now.) He says that a "big part" of whether he can keep playing is knowing that he can still evade rushers in the backfield like he did so famously in Seattle for so long, allowing him to create explosive plays downfield. It's not that Wilson didn't do this over the past three seasons. It's that he did it less, as evidenced by a more expedited snap-to-throw time. And when he did it, some of the theatrics were replaced by the efficiency that comes with experience, like a touchdown pass to Pat Friermuth against the Bengals last year, a play on which Wilson ducked under a free rusher, climbed the pocket and sidearmed a ball to his tight end in a rapidly closing window between two defenders. Same result as a vintage Wilson touchdown, only with about 300 fewer steps.

"I can still throw the ball a long ways, 65, 70 yards," he says. "I can still move. And I think that I'm capable of a lot. It's funny because to me, being in Denver my first year, I was hurt most of the time and battled through it. The second year I felt like myself again. Then going to Pittsburgh, obviously, unfortunately I got injured early in the season, [and it] didn't end up the way we wanted it to. But it just rejuvenated everything. And then being here, it's like, playing the stadium again, knowing that I've held the trophy there…"

This is the gist of the cold, fact-based case for Wilson. A string of injuries excuses the lowlights, his newfound health should unearth his DNA from his prime Seahawks seasons, and the adaptations he's honed over the past three years bring him full circle and crystalize him into the elite player he still sees himself as.

He puts it more concisely.

"Just believe. Why not?"

WHICH LEADS TO the other part of Wilson's milieu that bears further examination: his relentless faith both in himself and the power of positivity now that so much has changed. He is still like a machine that spits out staccato inspirational quotes. But his life is different now in ways that are objectively both good and bad.

He has a family of six (and seems open to expanding it even further), meaning he has a smaller but much more important audience growing up around him. He's also pinballed through the increasingly cruel spin cycle that a more attentive and vitriolic NFL audience and its industrial-strength media arm can unleash. NFL players speak all the time about the slow creep of cynicism and the efforts they must go through to fend it off.

Is the continuation of this Wilson Brand a way of setting an example for his own children, the rest of the world—including football—be damned?

"That's important," Wilson says. "But how could I have a bad day?"

FROM LEFT: DAMIAN STROHMEYER; JAMIE SCHWABEROW; BARRY REEGER/IMAGN IMAGES

Wilson is speaking just a few days before the 15th anniversary of his father’s passing. (Harrison Wilson III died due to complications from diabetes in 2010.) With time, the end of his father’s life has only fortified Wilson’s thoughts about wringing the most out every possible moment in a way that leaves permanence.

Within the sadness of Harrison’s decline came what Wilson sees as a miracle: his dad, lying in a coma he was not expected to recover from, hearing his mother singing gospel music. “All of a sudden he wakes up out of the coma,” Wilson says. “And seeing him in a coma for three and a half weeks, man, I can’t have bad days. Because you know what? If you believe that anything’s possible, believe in your faith, you stand on faith, truly stand on faith. To me, it’s like, man, there’s going to be some s----y days for sure, but it doesn’t mean that we have to make the next day a bad one.”

> “I can still throw the ball a long ways, 65, 70 yards,” Wilson says. “I can still move. And I think that **I’M CAPABLE OF A LOT.** [Being in New York] has just rejuvenated everything.”

Standing there with the late-spring sun beating down, baking into every inch of city concrete around us, Wilson has made me feel absurd for my skepticism. The cynic in me now feels buried, Hoffa style (perhaps fitting given that Wilson will now be playing in the Meadowlands). Maybe Wilson isn’t for everyone, but he *is* especially for people who need to believe that good things can happen anywhere, and always. For a Giants team coming off the most losses in the franchise’s 100-season history, maybe that’s a good thing.

I get it, as much as anyone can get anything after spending an hour with a person. After what he went through with his father, the source of so much of his joy and his fortitude, how ridiculous would it be to tell Wilson that he can’t fend off Jaxson Dart, the quarterback New York took in the first round? That the Giants, despite having the most brutal schedule in the NFL for 2025, can’t win some games people don’t expect them to? That Malik Nabers—a second-year Pro Bowl receiver for whom Wilson can already recite down and distance highlights (a shallow cross against the Commanders on third-and-12 in which Nabers picked up 28 yards and popped up quickly after getting blasted by linebacker Frankie Luvu)—won’t be even better with Wilson throwing to him? That reuniting with quarterbacks coach Shea Tierney, a graduate assistant for NC State when Wilson was at the school, is merely coincidence and not another element of this comeback narrative that has already set and hardened in his mind?

That he won’t be healthy?

As Wilson fades out of sight, eagerly taking a recommendation for barbecue that one of the police officers has given to Ciara, I thought about how some of the moments from the afternoon seemed crafted by a production company. The central criticism of Wilson is that he lives life in a way in which everyone is always watching (because they kind of are). And I thought of Wilson talking about the letter Harrison wrote him before he died, which outlined his assessment of life after 55 years, as well as his hopes and dreams for Russell.

I thought about a quote from the author Ge Fei, who wrote: “The best attributes of anyone or anything usually reside on the surface, which is where, in fact, all of us live out our lives. Everyone has an inner life, but it’s best if we leave it alone. For as soon as you poke a hole through that paper window, most of what’s inside simply won’t stand up to scrutiny.”

Basically: We’re all kind of messed up and confused inside. It takes a certain strength to continue building and perfecting the facade that is public facing.

Wilson thinks about that letter a lot and wonders what would be included in the one he’d have to write for his kids one day. And if you think of life that way, why wouldn’t you want every moment to look like the closing scene in the most beautiful movie ever made? Why wouldn’t you always at least try?

Why wouldn’t you stage your comeback here, in the land of hope and dreams? □

WELCOME TO THE BIG TIME

sky bet
19
UNITED

IMAGINE, DRAGONS

Few fans would have thought four years ago that a tiny team from the fifth tier would now find itself in the Championship.

UNDER ACTORS RYAN REYNOLDS AND ROB MCELHENNEY, **WREXHAM** BECAME THE FIRST TEAM IN THE HISTORY OF THE ENGLISH FOOTBALL LEAGUE TO BE PROMOTED IN THREE STRAIGHT SEASONS. HOW HAVE A PAIR OF HOLLYWOOD OUTSIDERS CRACKED THE CODE THAT'S FLUMMOXED SO MANY DEEP-POCKETED OWNERS?

by **THORE HAUGSTAD**

KYA BANASKO/GETTY IMAGES

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KYA BANASKO/GETTY IMAGES

ON A SEPTEMBER evening in 2020, Rich Fay walked out of a vegan restaurant called Shrub, having had a mushroom kebab with his future wife. He switched his phone back on and saw that he'd missed a text from a friend.

Then another text.

Then three more.

PING! PING! PING! PING! PING!

The texts were from fellow fans of Wrexham, the club stuck in the fifth tier of English football for the last 12 years.

"Mate have u seen this?"

"Ryan Reynolds?!?!"

"What the f--- is happening?????"

A few days earlier, a club statement had said that unnamed investors were looking to pour $2.5 million into Wrexham. But Ryan Reynolds? And fellow actor Rob McElhenney? Fay thought it was a joke. Then he got worried.

Fans had wondered why even a local car dealer would buy a club that had just finished in the lower half of the lowest nationwide professional league in England. The Red Dragons didn't have a designated training ground. They played their home games at the crumbling Racecourse Ground, which they didn't even own at the time. As someone who grew up in this blue-collar city in North Wales, once fueled by coal and steel, Fay says you wouldn't just be made fun of for supporting Wrexham—you'd be made fun of for *living* in Wrexham.

He had a theory. "They're both comedians," says Fay, a journalist who cohosts the Wrexham podcast *RobRyanRed*. "I thought they might be making a mockumentary. *Oh, look at this crap little football team*."

Less than five years after that September evening, Wrexham will play in the second tier of the English Football League (which is where Wrexham plays despite being located in Wales). They've been promoted three seasons in a row, a first in EFL history, which leaves one giant question: In the loss-making, rule-bending shark tank of British club ownership, how did the winners become the guy who

SHOW BUSINESS

McElhenney (far left) and Reynolds have turned their team into a compelling story, one that sponsors are lining up to associate with.

> *It says something about the state of English football ownership when* ***TWO HOLLYWOOD ACTORS*** *are among the people most grounded in reality.*

plays Van Wilder and Deadpool, and the creator of a sitcom about some friends running an Irish bar in Philadelphia?

IN THE SECOND episode of *Welcome to Wrexham*, the FX reality show that debuted in August of 2022, McElhenney sports a handlebar mustache in front of a white wall. Talking to the camera, he says, "Not sure what to get your special someone this holiday?"

Over upbeat guitar music, the screen switches to Reynolds: "Tired of opening the same old scarf or sweater? Try ... Ifor Williams Trailers."

Much like the ownership of Wrexham, the ad feels like a spoof but it's not. Ifor Williams was the main sponsor when Reynolds and McElhenney took over the club from a fan trust in February 2021, and the clip reveals the secret sauce.

Advertising, straight and undistilled, sprinkled throughout the series. Episode 7 starts by listing the main sponsors, with logos and endorsing voice-overs from the owners: Ifor, TikTok, Expedia, Aviation Gin—the last of which is co-owned by Reynolds, who is also cofounder of the marketing firm Maximum Effort (you can tell). Wrexham later signed up United Airlines, HP, Gatorade, Meta Quest ... you get the idea. There's no subtlety here: Reynolds and McElhenney are telling us they're trying to grow brand exposure, so here's another ad, we're doing this, it's working, and we don't mind that you know.

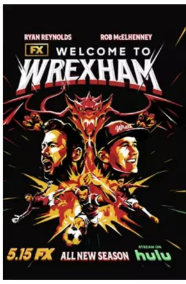
The deals are a catch for a club playing in front of about 12,000 fans every other week, but this was never about the locals. More than half of Wrexham's income was generated outside of Europe during the 2023–24 season, the latest for which financial results are public. The stadium name has been sold off to STōK Cold Brew Coffee, a U.S.-based company that doesn't even sell its product in Wales.

"Global brands such as TikTok, United Airlines and Aviation Gin realize that they can leverage off the appeal of Wrexham," says Kieran Maguire, a finance academic and the author of *The Price of Football*. "And they want to be associated with the success of the club and also, of course, the success of the show."

AN ORIGINAL DOCUMENTARY SERIES FROM
WRYAN REYNOLDS
WROB McELHENNEY
FX
WELCOME TO
WREXHAM
THIS ISN'T THEIR FIELD OF EXPERTISE.
8.24 FX
STREAM ON
hulu

AN ORIGINAL DOCUMENTARY SERIES FROM RYAN REYNOLDS & ROB McELHENNEY
FX
WELCOME TO
WREXHAM
9.12 FX
STREAM ON
hulu

RYAN REYNOLDS
ROB McELHENNEY
FX
WELCOME TO
WREXHAM
5.2 FX
THE UNDERDRAGON STORY CONTINUES
STREAM ON
hulu


RYAN REYNOLDS
ROB McELHENNEY
FX
WELCOME TO
WREXHAM
5.15 FX
ALL NEW SEASON
STREAM ON
hulu

COURTESY OF FX (4)

Reynolds and McElhenney also advertise to tens of millions of people on social media. They do interviews and podcasts and talk shows. "It's crazy," says Fay. "And now the revenues are insane."

In 2020–21, the season in which Ryan and Rob took over the team, Wrexham generated a total of about $1.5 million in revenue. When playing in the fourth tier (League Two) in 2023–24, they earned nearly $33.7 million. That was more than 11 of the clubs in the second tier (the Championship), according to *The Athletic*, which estimated that the commercial income—like ad deals—ticked in at $24.9 million, more than five clubs in the Premier League. Even after three promotions, the brand has grown faster than the team.

The revenue has given the club an enormous advantage. When in the fifth tier (the National League), the owners simply paid really good players lots of money to play for them. They lured Paul Mullin, the top goalscorer in the fourth tier, away from Cambridge United in 2021. They signed Ollie Palmer, a striker from *third* tier Wimbledon for a then club-record transfer fee of just over $400,000. "They were probably League One quality even when they were in the National League," says Omar Chaudhuri, chief intelligence officer at

PAUL GREENWOOD/SHUTTERSTOCK

Twenty First Club, which builds models that estimate team strength. There's no deeper secret for how Wrexham got a good team. They bought one. Even better, most of their rival owners haven't been able to spend this much on players, even if they've had the cash.

In the fourth tier, clubs must keep spending on players below 50% of annual revenue, and in the third tier the cap rises to 60%. The exception has been cash from equity investment, though that loophole closes this coming season. In the second tier it's not a percentage, but a cap on how much clubs can lose over a rolling three-year cycle. These rules are meant to help clubs stay sustainable, and to make sure that a guy like Jeff Bezos can't simply buy Grimsby Town and hoover up players with Amazon money.

So for a club to spend a lot, it has to earn a lot. While Reynolds and McElhenney financed much of the initial outlay, Wrexham has been powered by sponsor revenue—one of the few things worth more to modern football than actual money.

TO THEIR great credit, Reynolds and McElhenney know what they don't know. One of their first and best moves was to hire Shaun Harvey, an executive who had worked for Leeds and Bradford City in the top tier, and had been the CEO of the English Football League. Signings? Stadium expansion? Harvey knows. He advised the owners to get manager Phil Parkinson. The owners basically said, "O.K., let's do that."

And then Parkinson said no, so McElhenney went after him, in the words of Reynolds, "like a dog with a

bone." McElhenney called Parkinson from a parking lot, where he spent the next 90 minutes selling the coach on the club.

This self-awareness alone elevates Reynolds and McElhenney above the far too many owners who seem physically unable to spend money on their club—their *business*—without meddling in the football stuff. Enough investors and entrepreneurs believe *they* are best suited to handpick coaches and players worth tens of millions of dollars, based merely on the same *I-know-best* hunches as the fan in the pub. It says something about English football ownership when two Hollywood actors are among the people most grounded in reality.

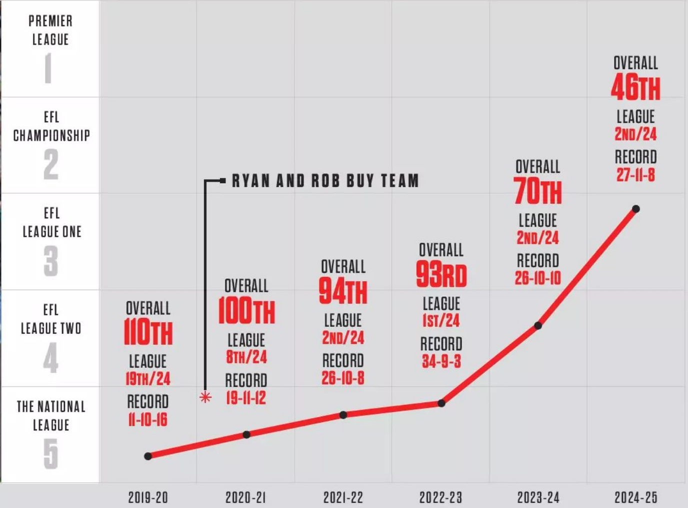
BIGGER AND BETTER

Fans routinely pack matches at the soon-to-be-expanded Racecourse Ground, including April's promotion-clinching win.

Instead, Reynolds and McElhenney have done what they do best, which is to give their audience a moving story. *Welcome to Wrexham* tears down the fourth wall to give viewers memes, reels, outtakes and self-deprecation, making it far funnier than the slew of unbearably polished club documentaries that flood streaming platforms. It's also honest about the risk involved. As McElhenney

WREXHAM ON THE RISE

Under their new owners, the Red Dragons have moved up three divisions and nearly 70 rungs on the English football ladder


PREMIER LEAGUE 1
EFL CHAMPIONSHIP 2
EFL LEAGUE ONE 3
EFL LEAGUE TWO 4
THE NATIONAL LEAGUE 5
RYAN AND ROB BUY TEAM
OVERALL 110TH LEAGUE 19TH/24 RECORD 11-10-16
OVERALL 100TH LEAGUE 8TH/24 RECORD 19-11-12
OVERALL 94TH LEAGUE 2ND/24 RECORD 26-10-8
OVERALL 93RD LEAGUE 1ST/24 RECORD 34-9-3
OVERALL 70TH LEAGUE 2ND/24 RECORD 26-10-10
OVERALL 46TH LEAGUE 2ND/24 RECORD 27-11-8
2019-20
2020-21
2021-22
2022-23
2023-24
2024-25

WISE INVESTMENT

Acquired for club-record fee of $3 million in the middle of last season, Sam Smith scored seven times in 18 games.

tells Reynolds in the first episode, "There is a version of this story where we are the villains."

The story was always at the center of the investment. Even the recommendation to buy Wrexham came from Humphrey Ker, a British screenwriter and actor who was working with McElhenney on the series *Mythic Quest* back in 2020. Ker told McElhenney to check out *Sunderland 'Til I Die*, the gritty Netflix documentary series about the giant club from northeast England that got stuck in League One for what would ultimately be four seasons. When McElhenney realized that clubs in English football can travel up and down the divisions, he told Ker, "We should do this." Which meant buying an actual club.

He dispatched Ker to draw up a list of targets. Ker later told British *GQ* that his research amounted to scrolling Wikipedia and checking out the stats section of the video game *Football Manager*.

Where others saw Wrexham as a backwater, Ker and McElhenney saw a wounded underdog. Wrexham is the third-oldest professional club in the world, and over the last 25 years the fans had been torched by threats of bankruptcy, a 10-point deduction for going into administration, and an owner who tried to kick the club out of the stadium so that he could sell it. All of which affected the mood among the 60,000 people in the city. "The football club's success is interlinked with the confidence of the town itself," says Fay. "If the club is doing well, the town is doing well."

The owners understood that, by lifting the club, they could change lives. Once Reynolds and McElhenney set foot in Wrexham in October 2021, having only watched the team on internet streams, they greeted fans, kids, pensioners, shop owners and even an "exorcist" tasked by the church with

NIK MESNEY/HUW EVANS/SHUTTERSTOCK

investigating paranormal activity. They posed for selfies, signed shirts, watched a powerchair game and downed shots with fans in The Turf pub next to the Racecourse. They hugged it out with the players, saying they could come to them "with anything." According to Reynolds, one player called him and asked if he could book him a rental car.

When Wrexham didn't get promoted in the first full season after losing in heartbreaking fashion in the promotion playoffs, the series showed us the despair in the people—the tears, the agony, the *what's gonna give us joy now?*

When Wrexham did go up a year later, thousands of people lined the streets for an open-top bus parade, and as the fans sang Elvis Presley's "Can't Help Falling in Love," Ker, now a director at the club, cried for the first time in 10 years.

When Wrexham reached the Championship with a 3–0 win over Charlton in April, it was Reynolds who broke down in tears. "These fans f---ing deserve it," said Mullin.

Now though, Wrexham is in a place where the air is significantly thinner.

THE CHAMPIONSHIP is the football version of a casino. One promotion away from the hyperlucrative Premier League, club owners gamble cash that can only be recouped by either finishing in the top two or winning the third promotion spot through a four-team playoff. "We refer to [the Championship] as the clown car of European football," says Maguire. "It makes no sense whatsoever."

Maguire says that in 10 of the last 12 years, the total wage bill of the 24 clubs has exceeded their revenue. "Before you've turned on the floodlights, before you've cut the grass, before you've even signed any players, clubs are losing money," he says.

The clubs that have dropped down from the Premier League come armed with parachute payments, a stack of cash paid out for having hit the big time, even for just a year. Some will have revenue of $130 million, likely more than three times that of Wrexham. As Chaudhuri points out, the financial gap between top and bottom is far greater than in League One. "The slope gets steeper as you go up the pyramid," he says.

Parkinson knows this all too well, having reached the Championship twice. "I remember when I took Bolton up [in 2017], it was, *Phew! This is huge!* in terms of the physicality and power in the division," he said right after Wrexham's promotion, and added that the jump in salaries is "incredible, mind-blowing."

According to Twenty First Group, Wrexham was about the 20th-best team in the league at the start of this summer. "I'd be very surprised if they're promoted straight away," says Chaudhuri. "I think a mid-table finish would be a fantastic result for them."

More challenges await. With 12,600 seats, the Racecourse is among the smallest stadiums in the league, and the construction of a new stand will temporarily reduce capacity. Tickets are already hard to find, and Fay says there could be a tipping point where Wrexham becomes unaffordable to locals, a trend that has spread across the top clubs in the Premier League. Fortunately for the locals, fan opinion matters. "Since Rob and Ryan have so much to lose, their credibility is on the line," says Fay. "They don't want to make any unpopular decisions."

Damage trust among the community, and you rip out the heart of the show.

"What makes it even better is that this isn't a state," says Fay, referring to ownership groups such as the Saudi government's Public Investment Fund, which owns Premier League club Newcastle United. "This isn't some dirty businessman who's got blood money. This is just two celebrities. And what's on the line for them is not money, it's reputation. Because if Wrexham fails, Ryan Reynolds fails.

"There aren't many football teams or businesses where you genuinely like the guys in charge."

A BIGGER QUESTION, given that the success has been driven by brand exposure, is what happens when the documentary stops. No series can run forever, even if *It's Always Sunny in Philadelphia* is now airing its 17th season.

The fans might worry about the day the owners turn off the cameras, sell and leave. "They are a bigger brand than the football club itself," says Maguire. "So how are you going to persuade global sponsors to continue to have that level of engagement with Wrexham if the owners are no longer attached to it?"

The exception, Maguire says, is if Wrexham gets to the Premier League, a global drama series in its own right. "Then to a certain extent [the club] should be able to become slightly more self-sufficient," he says.

Fay thinks Wrexham needs the show less now than before. "The documentary gave us validity and a platform," he says. "And now we're on that stage. You can watch every Wrexham game in the U.S., so the fans who follow us will continue to do so. And if you get to the Premier League, you don't need a documentary."

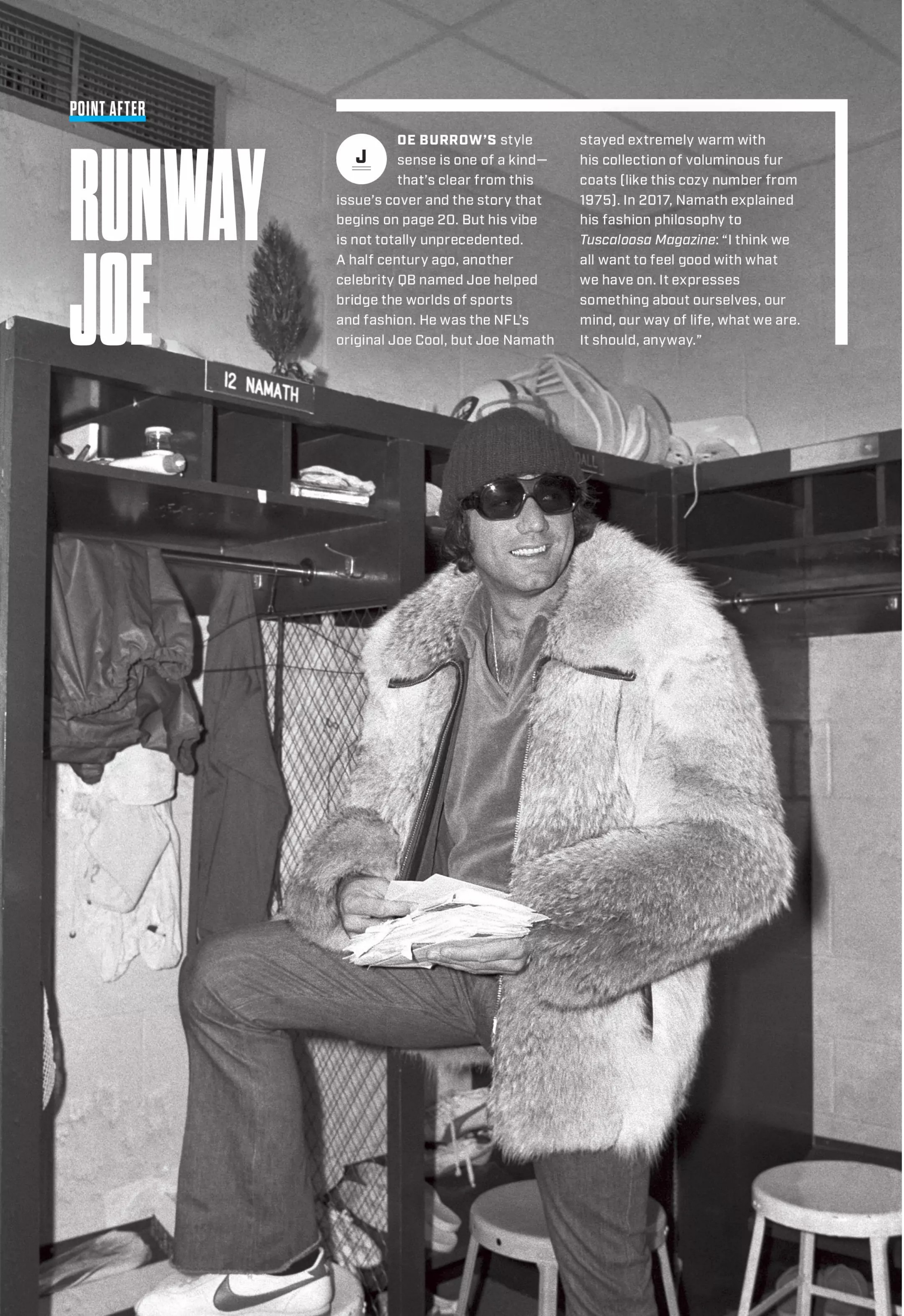
Could other clubs copy Wrexham? Maguire thinks it would be difficult. "You'll end up with football documentary fatigue," he says. "What they do have is first-mover advantage. They've built up a cult following. They are also using the right people in front of the camera. We know Ryan Reynolds, it's impossible to dislike him. So I think the chances of being able to repeat that are relatively remote."

At least their rivals can jot down *some* lessons from Wrexham about what sport can be in 2025, when every player and team can be sold as content. To win in football, you don't have to know everything about it. You don't even have to know the rules, as long as you tell the best story. And as Reynolds and McElhenney know, the best stories are about people. The underdog was never the team, but the town. ☐

POINT AFTER

RUNWAY JOE

JOE BURROW'S style sense is one of a kind—that's clear from this issue's cover and the story that begins on page 20. But his vibe is not totally unprecedented. A half century ago, another celebrity QB named Joe helped bridge the worlds of sports and fashion. He was the NFL's original Joe Cool, but Joe Namath stayed extremely warm with his collection of voluminous fur coats (like this cozy number from 1975). In 2017, Namath explained his fashion philosophy to *Tuscaloosa Magazine*: "I think we all want to feel good with what we have on. It expresses something about ourselves, our mind, our way of life, what we are. It should, anyway."



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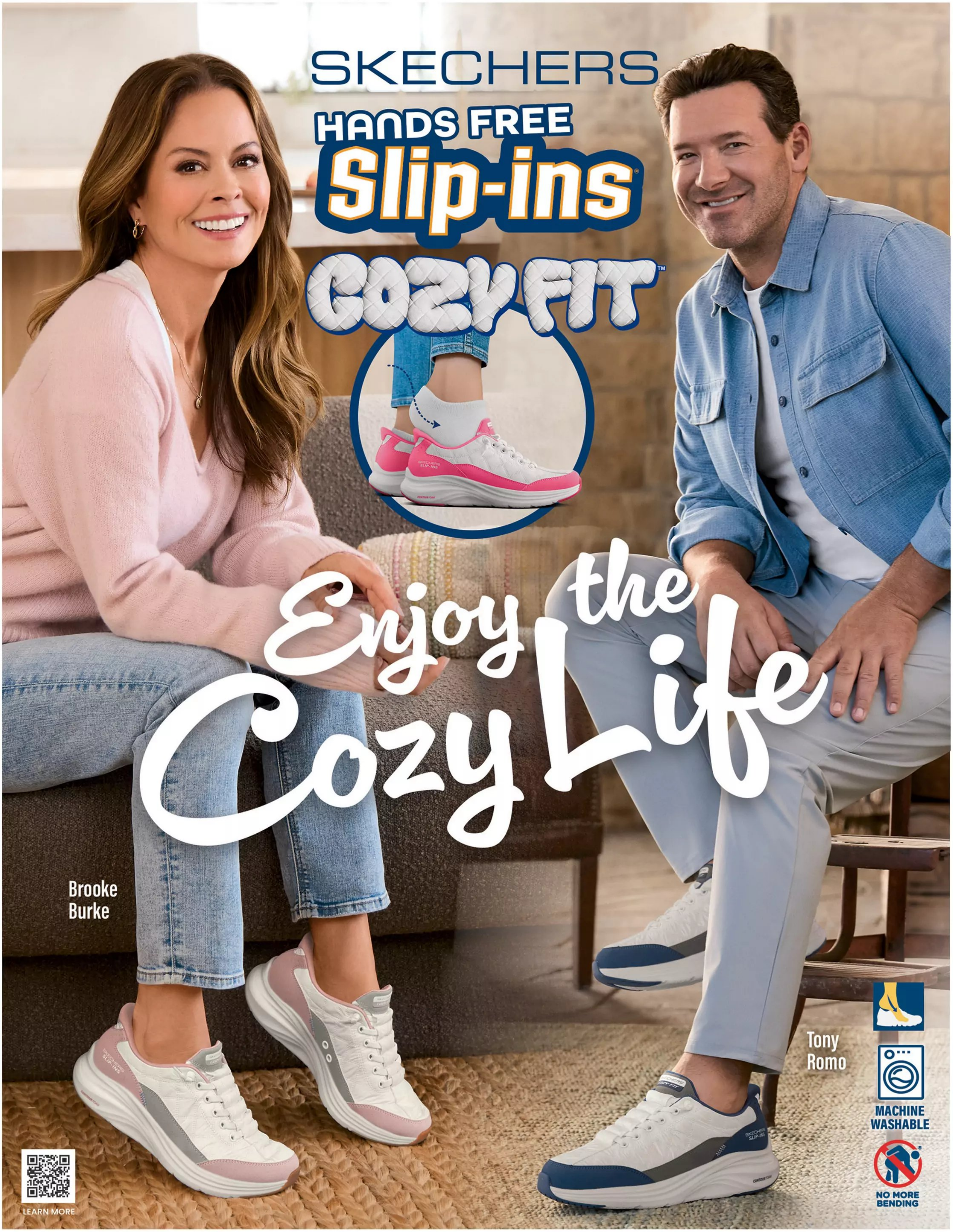
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